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STORY
OF BELTANA
—
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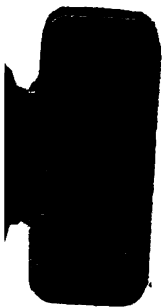
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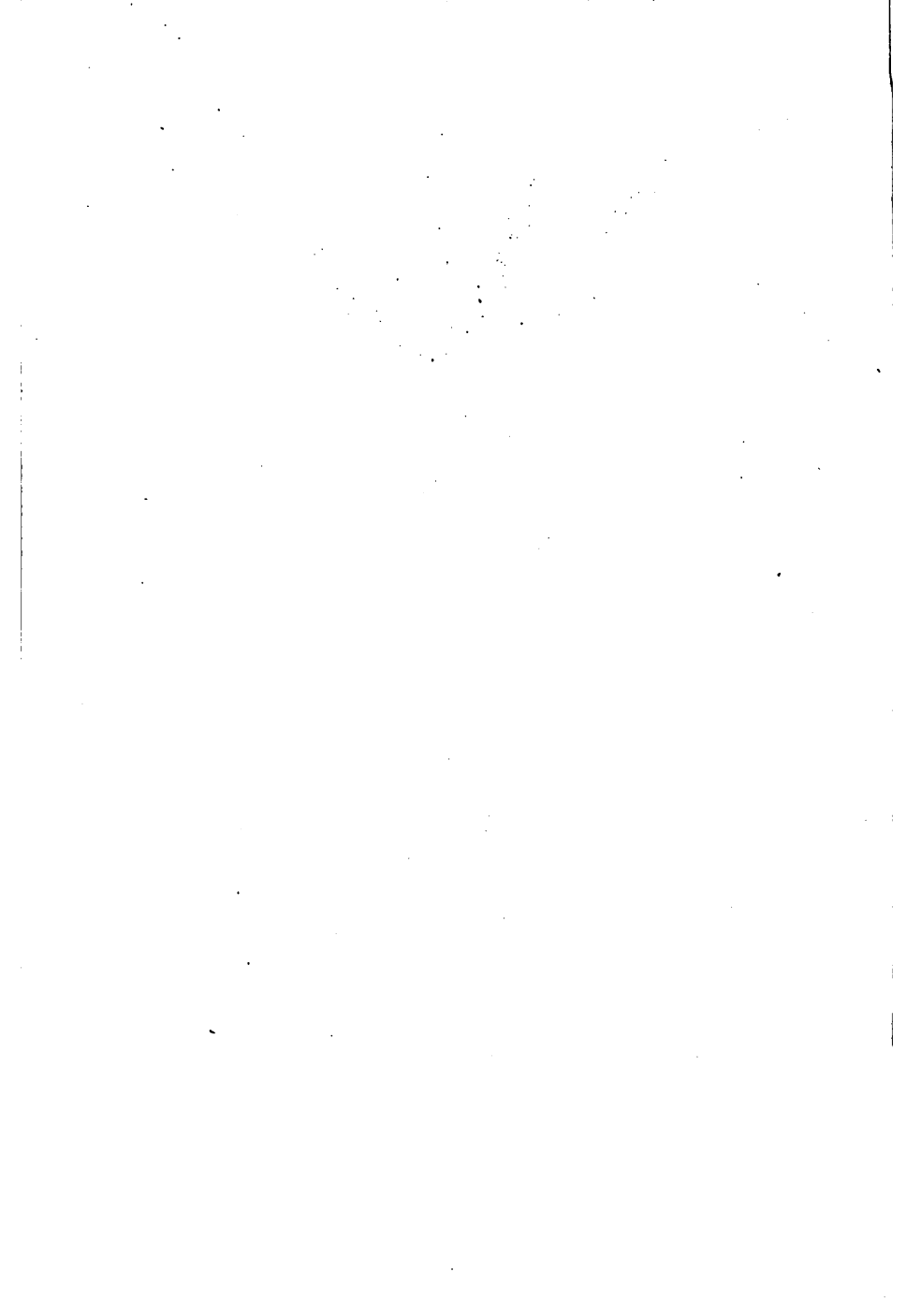
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BARHAM OF BELTANA

BARHAM OF BELTANA

By
W. E. Norris

Author of "*Matrimony*," "*My Friend Jim*,"
"*Lord Leonard the Luckless*," etc., etc.



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CONTENTS



CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE ARRIVAL OF THE "MONOWAI" .	I
II TERESA'S IDEA	13
III JACK DECLINES TO ARGUE	24
IV MARCHING ORDERS	38
V THE ENGLISH POINT OF VIEW	47
VI AUNTIE	57
VII THE TRYSTING PLACE	70
VIII THE FIRST BRUSH	82
IX A COMPACT	92
X HESITATION AND DECISION	104
XI IN THE MAGLIO GARDENS	115
XII OMENS	127
XIII RUPTURED NEGOTIATIONS	137
XIV BIG WORDS	151
XV GLADYS SAYS SHE IS SORRY	160
XVI MR. AND MISS BARHAM RECEIVE	171
XVII THE APPROACH OF PEACE	182

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXVIII	COURTEOUS INFLEXIBILITY . . .	193
XIX	GIVING UP THE GHOST . . .	204
XX	LADY WARDEN'S STORY . . .	215
XXI	THE OBVIOUS SOLUTION . . .	225
XXII	WHAT COULD NOT BE . . .	235
XXIII	THE IRRECONCILABLES . . .	247
XXIV	OLD HEADS AND YOUNG ONES . .	260
XXV	A GRACIOUS RECEPTION . . .	271
XXVI	JACK IS MADE TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF	282
XXVII	IMPERIOUS SURRENDER . . .	294
XXVIII	LADY WARDEN CONSULTS THE DOCTOR	305
XXIX	DEPARTURES	315
XXX	BELTANA ONCE MORE	326

BARHAM OF BELTANA

CHAPTER I

The Arrival of the "Monowai"

BARHAM, with his legs rather wide apart, his hands thrust into the pockets of his loose trousers, his Panama hat on the back of his head and a pipe in his mouth, stood beneath the verandah which ran round the sides of his spacious, somewhat pretentious stone mansion at Beltana, surveying the blue, lake-like estuary beneath him and the little city of Hobart on its farther shore. His daughter Teresa, who had stationed herself at his elbow and was eagerly scanning the distance through a pair of field-glasses, exclaimed:

"I can see her smoke; she will be round the point in a minute! It must be the 'Monowai!'"

"Of course it's the 'Monowai,'" Barham returned, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice; "there isn't anything else due. Behind her time, too, and no excuse for it in this weather."

"I suppose the captain doesn't know how impatient we are," observed the girl, with a sigh, as she lowered her glasses.

"I'm not impatient," her father declared; "I

BARHAM OF BELTANA

don't see what there is to be impatient about. I didn't order the horses to be brought round half an hour ago. I did order them to be taken back to the stables, though," he added, chuckling.

He was a powerfully built man of something under middle height and somewhat over middle age; his thick hair and close-cut beard recalled the plumage of the magpie, but with a predominance of white over black in the mixture; for he had always taken life hard and had in a certain sense found it so. It was impossible even to glance at his rugged face, his firm mouth and his alert eyes without recognising in him one born to rule; it might also be readily conjectured that he was not the gentlest of rulers. For the rest, he was disposed at the age of fifty-four to regard men and things as tolerantly as his temperament would permit, having been so unquestionably successful in his dealings with both, and being now so overwhelmingly rich. To be overwhelmingly rich does not, to be sure, imply in Tasmania, where large fortunes are rare, what it might on the other side of Bass's Straits; still Barham would have been accounted a wealthy man anywhere, and he was believed by many of those who knew him to be even more wealthy than he appeared. This fine house of his, which he had chosen to erect at little Beltana rather than on the outskirts of the

THE ARRIVAL OF THE "MONOWAI"

capital across the Derwent, was the prominent symbol of achievements in which his fellow-citizens took a certain vicarious pride. If they were not all of them personally attached to one who never concealed his poor opinion of their business capacities, they nevertheless felt him to be a credit to the place of his birth. Moreover, he had an additional claim on their respect in that he did not care a straw what anybody said or thought about him. So, at least, he was wont to proclaim.

Had he been forced to speak the truth, he must have acknowledged Teresa as an exception to the general rule. Teresa (on sufferance, her father would have said, and because her strong will and authoritative ways rather amused him), had always managed to get out of him pretty much what she wanted. She had odd, fugitive resemblances to him, such as the occasional set of her lips and a trick that she had of thrusting forward her chin, when opposed. Her features even bore a family resemblance to his; notwithstanding which she contrived to be a decidedly pretty girl. Beautiful she was not, her nose being too short, her jaw a trifle too square and her mouth somewhat too large for compliance with recognised rules; but she had white, even teeth and a pair of grey eyes which would have atoned for shortcomings much more serious than could be laid to

BARHAM OF BELTANA

her face's charge. As for her neat, graceful figure, it stood in need of no apologies and had small reason to fear comparisons. She said:

"Then I must repeat my order at once. We shall only just have time."

"It will be a good hour," her father returned, laughing, "before the steamer is tied up alongside, and another half-hour before Jack and his traps get put ashore. However, if you like waiting on the wharf under a grilling sun, I've no particular objection."

He might have had a particular objection and yet have given in. He had done so on many previous occasions — notably in the instance of Miss Teresa's recent absence for a year, in order to complete her education at an English school. He had at first objected very strongly to that scheme; for he had good reason, or thought he had, to hate England and English ways. But the girl had carried her point, and had perhaps derived some advantage from residence in the country which she persisted, despite frequent correction, in calling "home." He was inclined to think that she had. Anyhow, she was now back in her real home, which was a thing to be thankful for, and he presumed that, her youthful curiosity being satisfied, she would not desire to quit it again. Youthful curiosity, unfortunately, is more easily

THE ARRIVAL OF THE "MONOWAI"

whetted than gratified; but it was not Barham's habit to contemplate inconvenient eventualities.

"It is really too bad," remarked Teresa, while she drew on her gloves, after despatching a second message to the stable, "that poor Jack shall be done out of his public reception by having been left behind invalided."

"It really is," her father agreed, with a grim smile. "I forgot to mention the date of his arrival to the Mayor: otherwise no doubt they would have stuck up a triumphal arch for him and had a brass band in attendance to play him through the streets. As it is, I am afraid he will have to be contented with the consciousness of having done his duty in a humble manner."

"Which is all he will want."

"Only you think he ought to want more, eh? Well, perhaps he ought; but nobody that I ever heard of accuses Jack of being ambitious."

It was a long-standing grievance with Barham that his only son lacked that fierce determination to excel which he himself possessed in so eminent a degree. What is the use of a man who will make no serious effort to surpass other men? Jack, to give him his due, was a good horseman and a good shot; also he was well-conducted and had passed through school and university life in Tasmania creditably enough, if without much distinction.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

But these, after all, were scarcely more than negative merits. He did not pretend to care for money or power, and the fact of his not caring for these things was in some sort an affront to his father. When Jack was appointed as an officer in the second Tasmanian Contingent which was despatched to South Africa, Barham, who from the outset had spoken vehemently both in public and in private against the Boer war (for he was no advocate of Imperialism or of anything that tended to promote it), merely shrugged his shoulders, observing, that as nine hundred fools had volunteered for a force which was to number but two hundred, it must be supposed that the chief amongst them had been selected for service. He affected to take little interest in the subsequent adventures of that small body of horse; he would confess to no anxiety respecting the health of his son, who escaped wounds only to fall ill of enteric fever shortly before the contingent reëmbarked; he ostentatiously refrained from taking any part in the demonstration which greeted the warriors on their return. When the commandant, in narrating the particulars of a certain engagement, took occasion to say to him, "Your boy fought like a tiger, sir," his curt reply was, "Well, I presume you didn't expect him to run away, did you?" Yet it may be surmised that in his heart

THE ARRIVAL OF THE "MONOWAI"

he was glad to hear of the lad's having done well, while he was certainly gladdened by the prospect of receiving him back safe and sound. After all, a son, even though he be not a wholly satisfactory one, is more or less of a necessity to a man who is getting into years and must needs begin to think of bequeathing his riches, his responsibilities and his manifold projects to somebody.

Miss Teresa drove her father down to the jetty at a high rate of speed. The horses attached to the light buggy were young and fresh, requiring some management; but she had them well in hand, and the experienced whip who sat by her side liked to recognise in her an apt pupil.

"You may say what you like," he muttered approvingly, meaning at the same time to pay a compliment and invite a desired assurance, "but you're a Tasmanian girl at heart. There aren't many of your English fine ladies, I'll be bound, who are as much at home on a horse or behind one as you are."

"That only shows how little you know about them, father," Teresa remarked. "English-women have always been good riders and drivers, and they are better to-day than they have ever been before."

"Oh, they manage to avoid coming to grief with thoroughly well-broken ones, I daresay," returned

BARHAM OF BELTANA

Barham. He added, frowning slightly, "I know all I want to know about them, anyway."

"There are no people in the world like English people and there is no country in the world like England," declared Teresa; for it sometimes suited her purpose to exasperate the most indulgent of parents.

Barham, who had been leaning back in his seat, bounced into a more erect posture. "If that's the sort of infernal nonsense that they put into your head at school! — but no; it isn't nonsense; you're quite right! there's no nation in the world like the English, none to compare to them for blundering, arrogant ignorance and blind self-satisfaction. As for their wretched little rainy island, which can't produce enough to keep them alive for a fortnight ——"

But, catching sight of the girl's laughing face, his own abruptly relaxed and he, too, broke into a loud laugh. "Pulling my leg as usual, and be hanged to you!" said he. "Well, well, that's all right; I don't mind. Only don't say such things in earnest, or there'll be trouble."

Presently, after allowing his eyes to wander across the blue water and the sunlit hills, he asked, with a complacent wave of his hand, "Can England show anything to hold a candle to that?"

Teresa was either unable to say that it could or

THE ARRIVAL OF THE "MONOWAI"

was disinclined for further controversy; for she made no reply. The season was late in October, the air was deliciously fresh and clear, the lilacs, and the feathery, golden-blossomed wattles were at their best; if the red gums and the sheoaks and the Norfolk Island pines could not rival the deciduous trees of the Northern hemisphere in their spring apparel, they nevertheless harmonised with a scene which did not want for colour, both soft and vivid. Well might one whom Tasmania had endowed with health and wealth heave a satisfied sigh while he contemplated the fair surface of his native isle. It is true that he had sundry crows to pluck with her, or rather with his fellow-islanders; but these were family dissensions, very different from the permanent grudge which he cherished against those other islanders whom his daughter affected to admire.

There was some little difficulty about getting on board the steam ferry-boat at Bellerive, by means of which the broad estuary of the Derwent had to be crossed; but Mr. Barham, who did not care to keep his horses standing until his return, had persuasive methods of dealing with the recalcitrant, and horses, like men, soon recognised that it was a good deal easier to yield to him than to fight him. As soon as Hobart harbour was reached, and before the carriage could be disem-

BARHAM OF BELTANA

barked, Teresa was ashore and out of sight. Her father, who followed her by-and-by at a more leisurely pace, stepped across the gangway which separated the newly-arrived Melbourne steamer from the wharf, nodding as he went to sundry bystanders. He knew that they were watching him curiously; he knew that they were wondering what sort of a reception he would vouchsafe to the son who was much more popular amongst them than he had ever been; he knew also that they were given to saying unflattering things of him, though never to him; and this latter consciousness was, for some reason which it might have puzzled him to define, just what he liked. So it was in no bad humour that he shouldered his way to the deck of the "Monowai," where his two children stood in the sunshine, awaiting him, arm in arm.

Well, any man might have been proud to own two such children, and perhaps some symptom of pride might have been discerned by a close observer on Barham's rather grim countenance. Tall, loose-limbed Jack was not, to be sure, his sister's equal in point of comeliness — he resembled her less than he did his late mother, an amiable, insignificant woman, whitey-brown of aspect and character, long since dead and forgotten — but he was a strapping, pleasant-looking young fellow for all that, and when he smiled it

THE ARRIVAL OF THE "MONOWAI"

did not seem to matter much whether he was handsome or not. He was smiling broadly now, as he stretched out his disengaged hand to his father, who, after scrutinising him for a moment, remarked:

"South Africa doesn't seem to have disagreed with you much after all. But Tasmanians take more killing than Englishmen."

"Oh, I'm as fit as possible now, sir," the young man declared. "Fit to go back again, if that's all."

"H'm! I think we can find more useful employment for you here. What you want now is to settle down to the serious business of life, my boy."

"What Jack wants," said Teresa decisively, "is a good long holiday, and all the comforts we can give him. It will take him months yet to recover from all he has been through in those terrible hospitals."

Barham shrugged his shoulders. "Field hospitals aren't luxurious, I believe, and war isn't supposed to be a picnic. People who rush off to wars that don't concern them mustn't complain if they pull through without loss of life or limb. But come along; the horses are waiting, and I daresay you won't be sorry to have a decent breakfast again, Jack."

BARHAM OF BELTANA

On the return drive he made the young man sit beside his sister, who again took the reins, he himself sharing the back seat with the groom. It is not impossible that he may have wished to gaze his fill, unobserved, on a pair of broad shoulders and a lean, well-shaped head the sight of which had been denied to him for so long. He did not speak once, except when he was addressed, and then only grunted out a word or two of reply, but when Beltana was reached and the three were mounting the steps which gave access to the wide portico, he could not resist thumping his first-born on the back.

"Well, it's good to have you home," he said; "though I still think you were an infernal young ass to go."

CHAPTER II

Teresa's Idea

BE a man never so opulent, he will hardly, if born and bred in Tasmania, attempt to maintain what in England is called a well-appointed establishment; for servants are neither easy to obtain nor carefully drilled in a land where most mistresses are accustomed to take some share in household work. Mr. Barham, however, liked to make himself and those about him comfortable, and the second breakfast to which he and his children presently sat down was at least an ample meal, although there was nobody in attendance to change the plates. Jack, in the intervals of appeasing a fine appetite, kept gazing round the lofty, airy room with an affectionate, silent recognition of details which did not escape his father's notice.

"Worse places than Beltana, eh?" the latter remarked. "Rather more room for a long-legged fellow like you to stretch himself here than there was on board ship or in camp."

"Oh, the veldt was big enough for me," said Jack, laughing.

BARHAM OF BÉLTANA

"Ah! and several sizes too big for the British army to hold, by all accounts. A pretty exhibition the British army has made of itself in this business, first and last!"

"There may have been some mismanagement at first, but I don't think we did so badly at last, sir," the young man pleaded.

"Oh, you! — I'm not talking about you. You don't belong to the British army, thank God! The Colonials did well enough, though they fought in a bad cause. And if it hadn't been for the Colonials the South African Republic would have been an independent state, recognised by England, to-day."

Jack smiled, but did not dispute this somewhat audacious assertion; for he was by temperament a man of peace, notwithstanding his love of soldiering. But his father went on, as defiantly as if he had been contradicted:

"Yes, the Colonials have saved the British Empire, which, between you and me, wasn't worth saving. Mind you, I don't say that they have saved it for long; the Boers aren't beaten yet, and perhaps they never will be. Then there is Russia and there's Germany. England has enemies everywhere, and she has shown them her weakness."

"It seems to me, sir," said Jack, whose forbear-

TERESA'S IDEA

ance was not proof against such open disloyalty, "that she has shown them her strength. I think England will manage to hold her own against the world for a good many generations to come."

"Then you think what no man with eyes in his head and a very moderate supply of intelligence at the back of them thinks. England is rotten to the core!"

Jack flushed slightly; but before he could open his lips his sister intervened.

"Father talks like that," she calmly explained, "partly because he loves to blow the Australian trumpet and partly because he doesn't know much about England, which he has never seen. He isn't really the rebel that he likes to make himself out. Still, it would do him all the good in the world to pay a visit to the old country and get his ideas enlarged."

Nobody but Teresa would have dared to make such a speech in Barham's presence; but her impertinences amused much more often than they provoked him, and he greeted this one, as his custom was, with a loud laugh.

"Trust a woman for sticking to her own ideas in season and out of season!" he cried. "As for mine, they were enlarging themselves long before you were a baby, miss, and it isn't travel that will alter them at this time of day. Well, I must

"Ah! and several sizes too big for the British army to hold, by all accounts. A pretty exhibit the British army has made of itself in this business, first and last!"

"There may have been some mismanagement at first, but I don't think we did so badly, sir," the young man pleaded.

"Oh, you! — I'm not talking about your army, which doesn't belong to the British army, though it is called The Colonials. The Colonials did well enough, though in a bad cause. And if it hadn't been for the Colonials the South African Republic would have been an independent state, recognised to-day."

Jack smiled, but did not dispute the audacious assertion; for he was by nature a man of peace, notwithstanding his military training. But his father went on, as if he had been contradicted:

"Yes, the Colonials have saved the British Empire, which, between you and me, is a very good thing. Mind you, I don't say they saved it for long; they aren't likely to. Perhaps they never will. And then there's the South African Republic, everywhere, and so on. It's a very serious business."

"It's a very serious business, sir,"

out, without wait-
"How grand it is
hear the magpies
or wrong; there are
I say, Teresa, I
months. What do

and the girl doubtfully.
il, and there's nothing
except the filly, who is

ne down he must have
two during my absence,"
"And I'm not going to
J, please."

ne would have to see about
re skin and bone, and your
size they ought." She knew,
uld take a horse more powerful
than the old brown whom he had
ten to unseat her brother, while
never happier than when in the
made no further protest.
er later the pair were cantering up-
the bush behind Beltana, having soon
from the road which traversed it.
er a few bucks at starting, had settled
quiet behaviour; the filly, whose privi-

BARHAM OF BELTANA

lege it was to carry Miss Teresa, had perfect manners, and the weather was not less perfect. Indeed, the weather on the south-east coast of Tasmania is seldom anything else. The brother and sister, who from their earliest childhood had been close allies, fell gradually silent, each being engaged, in truth, upon furtive, faintly apprehensive scrutiny of the other. At their respective ages a separation of over a twelve-month must needs bring about considerable changes and may imply sheer, permanent severance from the past. They felt this instinctively, and the dread of some painful discovery, which had made them so loquacious at first, held them tongue-tied now. But one of them, at all events, soon perceived that there was no cause for her half-acknowledged fear. Jack was still Jack — leaner, taller, a shade graver, but the same simple, modest, kindly fellow that he had always been. Perhaps the development of a girl into a young woman is ever a more fundamental process than that of a boy into a young man, and perhaps the pupils at a European boarding-school are apt to undergo a transformation more complete than those of Bellona. As a fact, Teresa, although she herself was not aware of it, had altered noticeably in appearance, in ways of speech, possibly also in character. Jack made bold to tell her as much when at length they had risen to a

TERESA'S IDEA

height commanding a wide prospect of land and sea.

"Do you know," said he, "that you have become rather English, and very — what shall I call it? — very grown up! I don't know that I am not a little bit afraid of you."

"If you dare to bring such accusations against me again, I'll give you something to be frightened about!" was her indignant rejoinder. "There might be some excuse for my being timid in the presence of a hero who ought to have had the V.C. — yes, you needn't trouble to deny it; you deserved the V.C., and Colonel Dempster told me you did — but please don't pretend to be in awe of the humblest of your admirers. Besides," she added, stretching out her hand, "you and I are never going to let time or wars or anything else come between us, are we?"

"Rather not!" answered Jack, heartily, as he gripped the slim fingers extended to him.

"It isn't my fault that I have grown up," Teresa went on, "and as for being what you call English — well, we are all English for the matter of that."

"I thought some of us were Tasmanians," said Jack, meekly.

"It's the same thing," his sister declared.

"Oh, indeed! I wouldn't tell the governor so if I were you."

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"I am always telling him so; he can't be told too often. To be attached to one's own little corner is all very well; but that is no reason for turning one's back upon the rest of the Empire and making believe that one doesn't belong to it."

From the eminence which they had gained Jack could obtain a sufficiently typical view of that smiling, outlying portion of the British dominions where he had been born and bred. Beyond the twisted boughs of the gum-trees in the foreground lay a wide sheet of water, dotted over with white sails; on the farther shore sparkled the roofs and spires of Hobart, backed by thickly timbered hills and dominated by the purple shoulder of Mount Wellington; directly beneath was the imposing paternal mansion, built of yellowish stone and surrounded by green lawns and clusters of flowering shrubs, beneath which again could be descried the handful of humble wooden dwellings that constitute Beltana. Everything was flooded with sunshine; the air was sweet with a faint, yet pungent aromatic fragrance; the full, liquid notes of the magpie rose from far and near; a flight of chattering green parrots flashed into sight and vanished.

"I confess to an affection for my little corner," said Jack.

"Yes; but you can't want — and it wouldn't be

TERESA'S IDEA

good for you if you did — to sit still in it until you die of old age. We must go and have a look at the wide world some time, and we shall never have a better opportunity than the present, when you haven't yet been drawn into business and when you need rest and change to set you up."

Jack smiled. "Oh, I see! But he will never consent, you know."

"I think I can get him to consent, provided that you back me up. Oh, only passively. You won't have to say much; you must acknowledge, what I am sure is the truth, that you do wish to pay your respects to the old country just for once, that's all."

"But, my dear Teresa, I told you that I never wish for impossibilities."

"And I told you that one should never treat what one wishes for as an impossibility. Besides, I have as good as given my word to Gladys March that we shall all be in England before the end of the year."

"My conscience! that was pretty bold of you. I suspect there is a disappointment in store for Gladys March, whoever she may be. Any relation, I wonder, of a man in the Sussex Fusiliers whom I chummed up with at Bloemfontein, where we were both in hospital?"

"Good gracious! yes; his sister. So you actually came across Captain March in South Africa

BARHAM OF BELTANA

and made friends with him! This is an unexpected stroke of luck!"

"I don't see how."

"I see very well how it can be worked in. Of course, you are anxious to meet him again, and unless I am much mistaken, father will be anxious to meet him too. You see, he is really proud of you and your connection with the army, though he would rather die than admit it. Now tell me about the great Captain March. Is he as brave and handsome and popular and all the rest of it as Gladys makes him out?"

"He's a very decent fellow," answered Jack, "and as he got the D.S.O., I suppose he earned it. Yes, I should say he would be good-looking when his beard was shaved and his head wasn't bandaged up. Where did you fall in with his sister?"

Teresa briefly explained that she had formed with Gladys March at school a friendship far too intimate to be maintained by correspondence only, and that, as there was not the slightest probability of one party to the alliance being able to visit the Southern Hemisphere, the alternative course was obvious and imperative.

"We will go to England first," she calmly concluded, "and then I think we ought to give three or four months to France and Germany and Italy. But details can wait."

TERESA'S IDEA

"I should think they might," observed Jack, with a laugh. "May I ask whether you have said anything to the governor about this fine plan of yours?"

"Oh, yes; and he made the reply that he was sure to make. Clean out of the question! — not to be spoken of again, please! But it is going to be spoken of again, and he is going to give in. Only you must take my side to the extent of owning that you would like the trip if you could have it."

"I'll own with pleasure that I should like nothing better; but I'm afraid that won't help you much."

"It will help me as much as I shall want, I daresay," Teresa returned, with a determined little nod of the head. "If you had been against me, it might have been awkward, perhaps; but since you are with me, I think I shall manage to pull through. Shall we ride on now?"

CHAPTER III

Jack Declines to Argue

IN the days when Hobart was known as Hobart Town there disembarked (much against his personal wish, and at the expense of the Home Government) upon the shores of the island, then called Van Diemen's Land, one Richard Drake, convicted of fraud and embezzlement, and by reason of the same condemned to banishment. From the penal servitude which had formed a part of his original sentence, he obtained a speedy relief, being a meek, well-conducted person of loudly pious professions and small physical strength. Then, after finding favour in the eyes of a widow, who married him, and whose name he was permitted, as well as eager, to substitute for his own, he obtained virtual freedom, carried on a small solicitor's business in Hobart Town, and became, amongst other things less important, the father of Richard Barham. How on earth the narrow-chested, subservient man, with his furtively glancing eyes and his whining, high-pitched voice, ever arrived at the achievement of a feat so remarkable must remain one of those mysteries which can only

JACK DECLINES TO ARGUE

be solved by the discovery of missing pedigrees. Possibly the widow may have had fighting blood in her veins and inherited intellectual powers which she was able to transmit, but not to exhibit. It appears, in any case, that neither she nor her second husband ever rose above a level of obscure, qualified respectability, and both died when their only son was of an age at which the average human being is supposed to be incapable of taking care of himself.

Richard Barham, however, had from his earliest years displayed striking capabilities of the required order; and this was well for him, inasmuch as there was nobody to take care of him, while his parents — an inefficient, improvident couple, it would seem — left him well-nigh destitute. The boy (for he was scarcely more when thrown upon his own very inadequate resources) set to work at once upon that long struggle for fortune from which he emerged finally and triumphantly victorious before the first grey hairs made their appearance in his black beard. The narrative of his gains and losses, his hits and misses, his audacious ventures and far-reaching ingenuities, would take a long time to tell, and might not, when told, prove to differ essentially from the history of many a successful business man. What, perhaps, did give him some claim to distinction is the rather unusual fact that

BARHAM OF BELTANA

he never from first to last was indebted to anybody but himself; never had to thank a single fellow-mortal for aid, pecuniary or other. Thus pride, always the dominant note in his character, grew with the growth of power, while power grew far dearer to him than wealth. The latter, indeed, he affected to despise, except in so far as it served to promote the former, and although he had no notion of allowing anybody to get the better of him in a bargain, he was ever an open-handed man, generous, as he understood generosity, alike to friend and foe, liberal in his gifts to charities and public institutions, tolerant of honest stupidity, tolerant also (a little scornfully, it is true) of slights and rebuffs. These last naturally became less frequent as his possessions and influence augmented; still, conservatism and prejudice are apt to take deep root amongst insular communities, and there were families in Hobart who could not forget or forgive Mr. Barham's origin. Steadfastly they refused to know one who would doubtless have received a ready welcome in European capitals; their doors were closed against him and his, their noses went up and their eyes wandered to distant objects when they encountered him in the streets.

Hence, indeed, the Beltana mansion; for however indifferently or contemptuously a man may afford to treat personal affronts, he seldom wishes

JACK DECLINES TO ARGUE

the mistress of his household to be exposed to them. Not many of the Hobart residents keep carriages; Beltana, being across the water, might well be considered beyond calling limits; moreover, Teresa had not, up to the time of her departure for England, been old enough to be called upon. It may be that nascent uneasiness with regard to possible discoveries on the girl's part had had something to do with her father's sanction of an arrangement which was little to his liking, for if he dreaded anything, he dreaded his children being made aware that their grandfather had been a convicted felon. He himself had never in their presence alluded to this ugly blot upon the family annals; he hoped — somewhat fatuously it must be owned, for so shrewd a man — that nobody else would be cruel enough to reveal it to them; for his own part he had come to believe that it only existed through a miscarriage of justice. Most criminals are given to protesting their innocence, and the elder Barham had certainly described himself more than once in his son's hearing as the victim of a base conspiracy. His son, so seldom at fault in reading countenances and character, must have perceived that he did not look much like that; yet even his hard-headed son was not exempt from the common human tendency to believe what is pleasant in preference to what is the reverse. By the time that he

reached middle life his father's guiltlessness had become an article of faith with him.

Now, it was hardly to be supposed that judge and jury had deliberately banded themselves together for the purpose of condemning to transportation a prisoner against whom they could have had no common grudge, nor in truth had the alleged martyr put forward such a theory; but Barham, who was in the position of having to blame somebody for a catastrophe of which the particulars were unknown to him, chose to assume that he had a fair cause of quarrel with the whole English nation. He proclaimed aloud that he abhorred England; he denied that the colonies owed anything, least of all allegiance, to the mother country; he professed to be of opinion that they would be stronger as well as safer without her, and he looked forward to the day when the United States of Australasia should declare their independence. Holding such views, he could scarcely take active part in the political affairs of a community still loyal by sentiment and conviction, nor had he ever been a candidate for public life in that sense. He was contented, he said, to bide his time and await events which were sure to happen sooner or later. Meanwhile, he laughed at the Parliamentary vagaries and economical heresies of his fellow-countrymen, with their restrictions upon immi-

JACK DECLINES TO ARGUE

gration, their minimum wage and other exploded panaceas. They would learn wisdom, he predicted, when they were a little older. Chiefly for the sake of enraging other capitalists, he voted, as a rule, for the Labour party; though he thought they were a pack of idiots, and was in the habit of telling them what he thought. He could afford to be inconsistent — could, in fact, afford latterly to be anything that he liked.

However, when he came home shortly before the dinner hour, on the day of Jack's arrival, he asserted with some vehemence that he could by no means afford such a piece of uncalled-for folly as a voyage to Europe. The subject was introduced by him, not by Teresa, who had intended to leave it provisionally alone, and whom he encountered in the garden. So she turned a pair of surprised, deferential eyes upon him, saying:

"Oh, I know you don't mean to go; you told me that. But I didn't know it was a question of money; I thought we had enough."

"It isn't a question of money," her father returned; "it's a question of time, which is more important and more valuable than you imagine maybe. Why should I, and why should your brother, use up precious time in scampering over countries where we have no interests?"

"For the sake of acquiring them, perhaps, and

BARHAM OF BELTANA

for other reasons which might be given if there were any hope of your listening to them. But of course, when you say you won't do a thing, one understands that you won't. I can't think what makes you go back to it."

Barham laughed. "As if I didn't know that you and Jack have been discussing it the whole afternoon! I would do a good deal to please you, my dear, as you are very well aware; but what I have got to consider more than anything else at the present moment is that boy's future. And I have my doubts about him — I have my doubts. What has he to say for himself? Did you gather that he was prepared to begin serious work or not?"

"Well," answered Teresa, "I suppose he is prepared to obey orders; he always is. It doesn't follow that he is quite ready yet for what you call serious work or that you would be wise to force it upon him."

"It is sometimes wise to use force with those who know their own minds, and invariably with those who don't. You haven't told me what his objections to his own country are."

"How could I when he has none? But you can't be surprised if he is rather unsettled just now."

"I am not surprised; I am only wondering what

JACK DECLINES TO ARGUE

would be the best and shortest method of convincing him that he must settle where he is."

"The shortest method would be to tell him so; for he won't disobey you or argue with you. I doubt very much whether it would be the best though. You always say that you prefer restive horses and men to unwilling ones, and you expect too much if you expect that Jack will willingly give up all hope of seeing England."

"He has been telling you that he hopes to see England, then?"

"He doesn't deny that he would like it; but he has no hope at all of your giving way to his wishes and mine. If, by a miracle, you were to give way, you would reap your reward; for Jack is just as devoted to Tasmania as you are, and he would be glad enough to come home for good after he had been allowed to stretch his wings for a time. On the other hand, you may easily disgust him with Tasmania."

"I see your point — the old story of the pastry-cook's assistant and the sweets. But what security have I that he will be so easily disgusted with England? And will he ever be devoted to business?"

"Ah! that's another question; even you can't change people's natures, I'm afraid. As for disgusting him with England, you don't want or need

BARHAM OF BELTANA

to do that. Naturally, he wishes to have a look at the old country and to shake hands with some of the men whom he met in South Africa — by the way, he made friends with Captain March, Gladys's brother, there — and if such a reasonable wish is denied him, it may rankle in his mind for a good many years to come, I think. But what is the use of talking? Jack knows as well as I do, if not better than I do, that when your mind is made up there is no more to be said. Now, father, if you don't go and dress at once you will be late for dinner."

Only of late, and as a result of his daughter's insistence, had Barham adopted the custom to which she referred. Only of late, for that matter, had one o'clock dinner ceased to be an institution in his household; for he was a man of very simple tastes, and, like most Australians, had not found it unwholesome to wash down his evening meal with copious draughts of tea. But he rather liked being bullied by Teresa in such trifles; perhaps also he secretly rather liked her assumption of what he stigmatised as fine ladies' ways. It was at least not unpleasant to him to think of her as one entitled by fortune and position to account herself a fine lady.

It must be owned that he did not look his best in a costume which, for some reason not easily

JACK DECLINES TO ARGUE

defined, accentuates the good breeding or the reverse of its wearer. Barham in breeches and boots and on horseback had a commanding personality; black satin facings and a bulging shirt-front, adorned by a single pearl of great price, made an irredeemable plebeian of him. On the other hand, his son, though less conspicuously attired, might very well have passed for an average young English gentleman of the twentieth century, and possibly this assimilation to a detested type may have been vaguely perceptible to the tyrant of Beltana, who remarked as soon as he had finished his soup:

"The poorest specimen of Australian I know is the one who apes old-world fashions. I hope you haven't been infected by any foolishness of that sort, Jack."

"I don't think so, sir," answered Jack. "All the same, we have something to learn from the old country."

"I should like to know what!" snorted Barham. "I know what we have taught the English, and so must you, considering that you are just back from giving them their lesson."

And, as Jack only smiled and shook his head, he went on, with manifest irritation: "I tell you the English have had their lesson. They may be too stupid to have learned it; I shouldn't wonder if they were. What one reads about the obstinacy

BARHAM OF BELTANA

and insolence of English officers fairly passes belief."

"It is as well not to believe all that one reads in the newspapers, sir," Jack remarked.

"A thick-headed, overbearing, supercilious lot," his father declared, in accents which challenged contradiction. "Don't tell me you haven't found them so; you can't have helped it."

But Jack would neither contradict nor affirm — which was certainly rather provoking of him. His father was duly provoked, and did his very best throughout dinner to be provocative in return; but without success. If the young man had his own opinions about the war and the manner in which it had been conducted, he could not be induced to give voice to them, while he met with equal reticence hinted accusations that his silly eyes had been dazzled by a display of gold lace and cocked hats. He only observed that khaki had been the universal wear in South Africa, leaving the metaphorical innuendo undisputed. But when Teresa left the room Barham suddenly changed his tone.

"Now look here, my boy," said he, not unkindly; "I don't want to quarrel with you, and I don't think we shall quarrel; but if we are to get on together we must begin by understanding one

JACK DECLINES TO ARGUE

another. What is this fancy of yours for foreign travel that I hear of from Teresa?"

Jack was upon the point of replying that the fancy was his sister's rather than his own; but he reflected that it would hardly be playing the game to say that, and merely observed that one might pick up some useful notions by visiting foreign lands.

"That depends. Useless notions are picked up quite as easily as useful ones. It would be worse than useless, for instance, if you were to take it into your head that any other career than a Colonial one was open to you. We have interests in Australasia, you and I, which will require all the years of life that we can give to them between us, and your life will have to be given to them. Make up your mind to that, once and for all."

"I have made up my mind to it, sir," answered the young man, with an absence of either protest or enthusiasm which caused his father to fidget impatiently.

"I would that thou wert hot or cold!" the latter murmured under his breath. But aloud he said: "So much the better. I have nothing against travelling so long as it doesn't bring about idleness and discontent. Idle you won't be at home, because I won't let you; but no man can prevent you from being discontented, which means being prac-

BARHAM OF BELTANA

tically useless. As far as it goes, that's an argument in favour of giving you what you ask for."

Jack, who had asked for nothing, involuntarily opened eyes of surprised expectation; but his father raised a blunt, admonishing finger.

"Yes; but I suppose you have common sense enough to see that there may be much more powerful arguments the other way. To leave Tasmania for six months or a year, without leaving a single soul whom I can trust to represent me during my absence, might cost me many thousands of pounds. It's too long a price to pay for the gratification of a mere whim, and I'm not going to pay it. I hope I make myself clear."

"Quite clear, sir," answered Jack; "I should never think of asking you to make such a sacrifice for me. I don't know whether it has occurred to you that Teresa ——"

"Oh, never mind Teresa; she is very well able to fight her own battles. But I presume, from what she tells me, that you yourself would like to gad about the world for a time, if you could."

"Yes; but I don't want to be unreasonable."

"It seems to me that you have an uncommonly hazy notion of what you want," snapped Barham, who was really a little hard to please. "Well, we're not going to Europe, anyhow — which, after all, was one of the things that I wanted to make

JACK DECLINES TO ARGUE

you understand. I shall have a tougher job in getting you to understand the details of your business here, I suspect; but that can wait. Now, we'll go and smoke a pipe on the verandah."

CHAPTER IV

Marching Orders

IT was quite true that Mr. Barham held a large stake in the prosperity of his native island, and it was also true that he had neither colleague nor subordinate upon whom he was prepared to confer plenary powers; for he had always managed his own multitudinous affairs, taking no man into entire confidence. Partial confidence had indeed to be accorded to the shareholders, whose co-operation in the form of capital his ever-developing affairs required; but these gentlemen asked few questions and gave little trouble, the name of Barham being a sufficient guarantee for the soundness of their investments. In the timber trade, in sheep-farming, in fruit-growing, and of late more particularly in mining operations, that name had become the equivalent of success. With imagination, backed by ability and wealth, what more can a man want to render himself successful, unless, perhaps, it be luck? But Barham would never acknowledge indebtedness to that elusive factor.

MARCHING ORDERS

"Don't talk to me about luck, sir!" he said on one occasion; "there's no such thing in this world — nor ever was. Do you suppose that Waterloo was won by luck? — or Trafalgar, or Austerlitz, or the millions of the Rothschilds? No! You may be clothed in purple or you may go in rags; but depend upon it, you deserve your garb, whatever it may be."

There was one garb, stamped with the broad arrow, which he could not believe to have been deserved by its wearers in all instances; but it has already been mentioned that he allowed himself the indulgence of occasional inconsistency. To his son he was not, for the time being, disposed to give indulgence of any kind. A very few days sufficed to convince him that Jack, if tractable and fairly intelligent, had inherited nothing of his own energy and swift insight and daring. In the wet and stormy western regions, whither the young man was conducted by his father to inspect mines and machinery from which large profits were beginning to accrue, Jack gave evidence of the same patient, rather cautious temperament that he displayed when visiting acres of orchards on the smiling banks of the Huon River, and riding across sheep-runs on the northern side of the island. He was interested and willing to learn; but enthusiastic he evidently was not.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"Do you know," Barham said at last, with a chagrin genuine enough, yet mitigated by that sense of superiority to the person addressed which was as the breath of his nostrils to him, "what you would do if I were to die to-morrow? Why, you would realise; that's what you would do — and quite right, too! You're no man of business."

Such was the verdict that he took back to his daughter, after a week spent in making a hasty tour of dominions over which he held sway.

"Jack's no man of business; never will be, I fear. Sober and steady, if you like; sound qualities in their way; only nobody ever made a fortune by them."

Teresa demurely pointed out that there did not seem to be any very pressing need for Jack to make a fortune.

"Well, he wouldn't do it if there were," the man who had done it returned, with a certain self-complacency. "Perhaps you'll say I ought to be thankful because he is too prudent to run risks with what has been made for him, and perhaps I am. Still, that's a small mercy, when all's said. The question with me, as I think I've told you before, isn't so much one of money as of how to get the fellow to take an interest in his work and his life."

Teresa sighed and gazed rather wistfully at the

MARCHING ORDERS

far horizon. "Life might be made interesting enough if one were but allowed to see it," she remarked.

"My dear girl, you'll do no good to yourself or anybody else by harping upon that old string."

"I suppose not," Teresa mournfully acquiesced. "Poor Jack!"

"One word for Jack and two for yourself, eh?" said her father, with a short laugh. "I can't for the life of me see what either of you has to grumble at, but it comes of your both being young, I dare say. Well, youth is a complaint which soon cures itself."

It flashed across him that youth resembles old age in that respect. He was not yet an old man and he was a remarkably healthy one; yet he was conscious of having reached a time of life when we grow unselfish perforce. To get our own way in our declining years at the price of displeasing and disappointing the younger generation is scarcely worth while; more and more important does it become to us that others should obtain their desires; less and less ardent are our own. Barham, however, was under the not unnatural impression that he could make other people want what he wanted; for he had hitherto always been able at least to make them do what he wanted.

Returning one day from his office in Hobart,

accompanied by the dutiful Jack, he found his daughter pensively perusing some letters which she had received by the English mail. He had already read his own, and he glanced inquisitively at hers.

"You appear to have a number of European correspondents," said he.

"My school friends haven't forgotten me yet," the girl answered; "but, of course, they will before long. They don't know that we shall never meet again, you see. Gladys March writes to make a suggestion which would be perfectly delightful if it didn't happen to be quite impracticable. She and her father are going to spend the winter in Malta with Captain March, whose regiment has been sent there from South Africa, and she wants to know why we shouldn't take Malta on our way to England. The only reason that I know of why we shouldn't is that we are not going to England. I must write and tell her so."

"Yes, I think you had better," her father briefly agreed; "it's an excellent reason."

But later in the day he asked a few abrupt questions about the March family. Of how many persons did it consist? Where did they live in England? Were they rich or poor, influential or ordinary? Had Jack formed a great intimacy with the young officer who, like himself, had suf-

MARCHING ORDERS

ferred from the scandalous inadequacy of English hospital accommodation?

Jack, in reply, did not think that either he or Captain March could have been better cared for than they had been. He added that intimacies sprang up quickly in hospitals, but was modestly doubtful whether March entertained as vivid or as pleasant a recollection of him as he did of March. "It isn't over likely, I'm afraid; for he was a very popular fellow, as he deserved to be, and, of course, he has any number of friends." Teresa answered the remaining queries to the best of her ability. Mr. March, who had recently been left a widower, lived in Sussex, and had only two children. He was of ancient lineage, she believed; but she did not think they were particularly influential and was sure he was not rich. The further information was volunteered that Gladys was much interested in what she had heard about Tasmania and the triumphs won in that distant field by unaided industry and strength of character.

"You may tell her that we shall be pleased to see her if she likes to pay Beltana a visit," was Mr. Barham's acknowledgment of this personal tribute. He then stuck his hands in his pockets and went off for a stroll round the garden. Wandering amongst the many-coloured borders and and the well-grown flowering shrubs which had

few attractions for him, though he spent considerable sums of money upon them, he asked himself — not for the first time — what was going to become of Teresa, and felt, without admitting, that her future presented more difficulties than Jack's. His commonsense forbade him to cherish hopes of keeping the girl for himself much longer; in the natural course of things she would marry; but where was a suitable husband to be found? In Melbourne or Sydney perhaps; scarcely in prejudiced Hobart, where the best families were, as we have mentioned, inclined to look askance upon the descendants of convicts. Even in Hobart a big dowry might accomplish much, if one wanted to purchase a son-in-law of social eminence; but really one was not yet reduced to such straits. There was assuredly no man in Tasmania, nor, for that matter, in Australia either, who could be considered quite worthy of Teresa. England remained. A passing vision of mating Teresa with some British nobleman, and avenging himself upon his hereditary enemy after that circuitous fashion, flitted across the cogitator's brain and brought a smile to his lips. But the smile changed quickly into a rather savage grin.

"Before I'd see my daughter married to an Englishman I'd see her a solitary old maid for the rest of her days!" he muttered, kicking an un-

MARCHING ORDERS

offending fir-cone from his path with some violence.

During dinner that evening the young people had the conversation all to themselves, their father having dropped into one of those long fits of silence which were not unusual with him; but no sooner had Teresa retired to the drawing-room than Jack was made the recipient of a curt announcement which astonished him to the extent of taking his breath away.

"I have decided to take passages for Naples by the first available boat," Barham said, as coolly as if he had been stating his intention of going into town on the morrow. "Letters have reached me to-day which make it rather desirable for me to visit London on business. As, however, there is no immediate hurry, we may very likely put in a short time at Malta in order to give your sister an opportunity of seeing her friends there. Now, I don't mind telling you that I am not absolutely obliged to undertake the voyage. It may be of advantage to me, and what I have seen and heard of late gives me hope that it may be of advantage to you. In a word, young fellow, this is a concession to your wishes for which I shall expect to be compensated later on. In the shape, I mean, of rather more zeal on your part, when we return,

BARHAM OF BELTANA

and rather more interest in our joint affairs than I have contrived to get out of you so far."

Jack gladly, though wonderingly, made the reply that seemed to be expected of him. His father, he presumed, meant to be kind and was undoubtedly doing a generous thing; yet it was difficult to believe that he was actuated by the motive to which he laid claim.

Nevertheless, Barham had spoken with sincerity, being honestly ignorant of the truth, which was that he had come to this sudden determination, not on Jack's account, still less for the sake of enlarging his financial operations by conference with London financiers, but simply and solely because Teresa wished it.

CHAPTER V

The English Point of View

WHILE sun-warmed Tasmanians were enjoying all the fresh delights of spring, which in their latitude is but the first and best part of a prolonged summer, England, under low, grey skies and swept by gales that drove the yellow leaves before them, was once more making ready for that winter season which with us is apt to be equally prolonged, and which most of us like in our hearts, though we may sometimes abuse it. Winter is the season for sport; a country gentleman must be impoverished indeed if he cannot keep something on four legs to carry him a short distance with hounds, and there were pheasants, if no superabundance of them, in the Brockhurst woods. Moreover, it is at least a blessing to dwell in a country which produces coal. Mr. March, sitting near the fire in his great oak-panelled, half-lighted dining-room, one long, thin leg crossed over the other, and his slim fingers tapping the table at his elbow, sighed and remarked:

“One might go farther and fare worse. I don’t

BARHAM OF BELTANA

know, I'm sure, what they burn in Malta; they can't grow wood on that rock, I presume."

"The chief point about Malta," answered his daughter, who had drawn away her chair from the table, so as to face his, "is that one will very seldom want to burn anything there. The sun will make us independent of fuel. Besides, we shall have Oliver."

"I don't quite follow you, my dear," said Mr. March, smiling. "The sun doesn't shine at night even in Malta, I believe, and whatever may be Oliver's virtues and charms, it would not have occurred to me, I confess, to think of him as a substitute for a heating-apparatus."

"He is like the rest of us," returned the girl, quick to resent what she took for a disparaging remark; "we are not excitable or enthusiastic people; that isn't our way. But his heart, at any rate, is in the right place."

"I am glad to hear it, since you have apparently discovered the right place for his heart to occupy. Or is it only of his hand that you mean to dispose?"

"I am in hopes that they may go together," Gladys March answered.

It seemed a good deal to hope for, considering that her somewhat fastidious brother had not yet set eyes upon his destined bride; but she looked as

THE ENGLISH POINT OF VIEW

if she might be capable of carrying out a project upon which she was bent. People with clear, white skins, grey eyes, black hair, and aquiline noses seldom lack tenacity or perseverance. They seldom lack beauty either, and it is no slur upon the other ladies of Sussex to say that Gladys March was the handsomest young woman in the county. No doubt she was well aware of a circumstance which did not count for much towards augmenting her share in that pride which was one of the family features or failings. In physical features, as in trend of character, the March family had for many generations exhibited remarkably little variety. They had always had pale faces and black hair and hook noses; they had always carried their well-shaped heads high, had always been proud and almost always poor. Their present chief had scarcely any hair left, the worries of existence in a large house and upon a small income having made an old man of him rather before his time; but he was still handsome, despite his bald head and wrinkled brow, while his spare figure might have passed for that of a youth. He stared absent-mindedly at the fire, continuing to drum upon the table with his fingers, and made no rejoinder to his daughter's last remark.

"Aren't you going to smoke?" she asked at length, pushing a silver cigarette-box towards him.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

Smoking in the dining-room was a recent innovation at Brockhurst, where old-fashioned ideas and habits prevailed. Mr. March had adopted it since his wife's death, just as he had fallen into the way of lingering there after dinner until close upon bed-time. He was more comfortable there than in the drawing-room or in the library, and the new practice conduced to economy in lights and firing — a consideration which necessarily had weight. Not that he loved economy, or the necessity for it; not that he had any natural aptitude for saving money; his inclination was rather to run into debt superbly, as his predecessors had done. But as he had married young and had married a rather expensive wife, self-denial had been imperative upon him all his life through. A life of self-denial seemed likewise to be in store for his son and heir — unless, indeed, the latter should have the luck or the prudence to espouse an heiress. He reverted to that topic when he had lighted his cigarette.

"Is there the slightest reason to suppose that Oliver will fall in love with this girl?" he asked. "Oliver isn't what you could call susceptible."

"I don't know," Gladys answered, "that there is ever much reason to expect that anybody will fall in love with anybody else; still, when two people are thrown together, they very often do."

THE ENGLISH POINT OF VIEW

"Unless they are thrown at one another's heads. And even then, I suppose, sometimes ——"

Mr. March returned to his study of the glowing coals, resuming presently, "She is rather vulgar, of course."

"Not in the least degree; she is charming."

"And very rich, you say?"

"Well, her father is; and, as he has only two children, he may be expected to give her a handsome dowry if she makes a marriage that pleases him. Which this marriage certainly ought to do."

"I hardly see why it should. I doubt whether in my own humble person I shall be altogether pleased with it if it comes about. But we know what class of people mustn't be choosers."

"You will like Teresa," Gladys confidently assured him; "she is bright and unaffected; she doesn't talk with a twang, and isn't at all elated by having plenty of money. Besides, she adores England; so it only remains for her to adore Oliver. I can't answer for Mr. Barham, who may very likely be a rough diamond ——"

"Oh, one pictures him without difficulty! He will have hairy hands (the hairy heels are a matter of course), and a loud voice, and affably familiar manners; he will exude gold from every pore, and drop an 'h' from every word that begins with one."

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"Well, but even so he won't hurt much at a distance of thirteen thousand miles. And, after all, when one thinks of who other people's fathers-in-law are nowadays."

"Oh, it is a consolation, no doubt, that if we have to blush for him, we shall blush in exalted company; but following the fashion, as you know, has never been a very easy process with me. I am resigned; I am not jubilant. In any case, we need not count our golden eggs before they are hatched, or even laid. It is conceivable that the golden Barham may not be attracted all the way from the Antipodes to Malta by your baited hook."

"He knows nothing about baits or hooks; and it is not Mr. Barham whom I am trying to attract. Mr. Barham, I suspect, will obey Teresa, who will be landed at Malta by nothing more attractive than the prospect of seeing me again. I needn't tell you that I haven't made the clumsy mistake of holding out Oliver to her as an inducement."

"Indeed? And Mr. Barham will obey his daughter, will he? Your nice, unaffected girl sounds somewhat masterful. However, that is, or will be, or may be, Oliver's affair, not mine. It is a pity that he is rather hard to please, and a still greater pity that he can't manage to live upon his allowance and his pay." Mr. March spread out his thin hands to the blaze and fell silent for a

minute. "Most things are a pity," he concluded, with a rueful smile.

He might be excused for thinking so. Few mortals are more to be pitied than those who are born to and educated for a position which precludes them from earning money, yet which can be maintained by no other means. Philip March might, it is true, have let his beautiful old Elizabethan mansion, instead of shutting up two-thirds of its rooms, might have betaken himself to some more humble place of residence, or in earlier life have entered a profession; but then he would have had to be a very different man from what his Creator and hereditary temperament had made him. Being what he was, the idea of leaving Brockhurst had never so much as crossed his mind. By his way of thinking, it was as obligatory on him to dwell in the home of his forefathers as it was painful and galling to cut down expenses which they had been wont to incur and had seldom defrayed; he knew that he passed for being close-fisted; and no character could have been less to his mind; still, with a certain mute stoicism, he accepted that and other vexations as inevitable. In much the same spirit he had accepted the late Mrs. March, a peevish, extravagant woman who had spent a great deal of her time in paying visits to friends and as much of her husband's money as

she could get in paying clamorous dressmakers. The problem of making both ends meet had been to some extent simplified by her demise; but how Oliver was to keep the old place up, when the time should come for him to succeed to it and to inexorable succession duties, remained a problem insoluble by the paternal wit. If Colonial gold could solve it, the Colonial accompaniment must obviously be made welcome.

Gladys broke in upon her father's musings presently by saying, "I am going to see Auntie to-morrow."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Mr. March. "I haven't seen her for months myself, and I don't know who has — except Browning."

"Well, I am going to try, at any rate," answered the girl. "It was Dr. Browning who told me that she had been asking for me."

After a moment she added, "By the way, the ghost has reappeared. Dartnell, the butcher, rode out to the Dingle on Wednesday evening to make some remonstrance about the dogs, and he had hardly tied up his horse at the gate when he found himself face to face with the spectre. It vanished immediately, he says."

"So did he, I should imagine," observed Mr. March, with a smile.

"Well, yes; he admits that he was in the saddle

THE ENGLISH POINT OF VIEW

again and half-way home before he remembered that he had omitted to lodge his complaint. But he is prepared to swear to what he saw — a gigantic figure, wrapped in a long grey robe and brandishing a heavy stick."

"I should be almost prepared to swear that what Dartnell saw was your aunt, dressed up and bent upon scaring him off her grounds. If my memory doesn't deceive me, the last witness described a filmy white apparition. Aunt Matilda should be more consistent in her choice of costumes."

"But I really don't think," objected Gladys, "that even a badly frightened man could call Auntie gigantic."

"It would be quite like her to prowl about on stilts; I daresay she does. Anyhow, as you are going to pay your respects to her, you might ask her to deliver a message to the ghost from me. If I may be granted the favour of an interview, I will undertake to exorcise him for her forthwith."

"Your message shall be given," Gladys promised; "but I don't think you will get your interview."

"Nor do I, my dear," answered Mr. March, getting up and moving towards the door.

He stopped on the threshold to kiss his daughter's forehead, and watched her whilst she mounted the broad staircase, her bedroom candle making

BARHAM OF BELTANA

a diminishing spark of light in the vast spaces of surrounding obscurity. Then he retired to his private room and fell to his constant, yet most uncongenial, occupation of balancing one long column of figures against another.

CHAPTER VI

Auntie

IF the labours of the Psychical Research Society prove anything (but perhaps they do not prove a great deal to stubborn minds), it is surely that irrefragable evidence is a hard thing to come by, and that a man may, should it so please him, believe in the environment of disembodied spirits without thereby abrogating his right to be considered a reasonable being. "We all," as the rector of Brockhurst liberally, if a trifle too comprehensively, remarked, "accept Noah's Ark, and Jonah's whale; why, then, should we not admit the occurrence in the present, as in the past, of phenomena beyond our comprehension?"

The rector of Brockhurst did not deride the long-established, well-authenticated ghost of the neighbourhood. He would have offended the majority of his parishioners very much if he had, and he was too old a man, as well as too sensible a one, to quarrel with his parishioners over minor matters of faith. Furthermore, he was by no means certain that he had not on one occasion be-

held the wraith with his own clear, sober eyes. Approaching the Dingle in the grey twilight of a winter evening, he had certainly seen something like a tall, draped form which flitted quickly through the trees and vanished. He had mentioned the circumstance to Lady Warden, who had rather uncivilly rejoined that he might think himself lucky to have met with nothing worse, and that people who chose to call upon her without making an appointment must take their chance of being mauled by the dogs which were necessary for her protection in so lonely a place. He did not often visit the Dingle, by appointment or otherwise, although he had kept on good terms with Lady Warden, who attended church regularly once a week. For the matter of that, visitors had for many years ceased to leave cards at the door of the eccentric old lady, who never took the slightest notice of them, and who was rarely seen outside her own ill-kept domain, save on Sunday mornings. She and her haunted house remained mysterious, but had, through long use and wont, fallen into the category of things accepted (as in the rector's scriptural analogy) and little discussed. Only from time to time was interest revived by some such alleged experience as that of the affrighted Dartnell.

At a period far back in the memory of old in-

AUNTIE

habitants Lady Warden, then a young and pretty widow of a few months' standing, had purchased the place where she was destined to spend the whole remainder of her strange, solitary life; and almost, though not quite, immediately afterwards she had adopted habits of rigid seclusion which nothing had interrupted since. There was a dimly remembered romance, connected with her earlier years, which was said to explain why Mr. March, to whom she was not really related, always called her his aunt. She had at one time — so it was believed — been betrothed to an uncle of his, Charles March; but there had been some hitch or breach which had resulted in her espousing Sir William Warden, a man many years her senior, whose death had promptly followed his second marriage. Then, at a juncture which might have seemed propitious for the renewal of broken vows, Charles March also had perished untimely in a yachting accident, and this catastrophe, some people alleged, accounted for the subsequent living burial of the woman who had jilted him. Others were of the opinion that Charles March — a brilliant and well-known man in his day — had not been accidentally drowned, but had “done something” which had prompted him to take his own life, and that Lady Warden knew what it was. But this was a theory supported by no evidence

BARHAM OF BELTANA

and grounded probably upon nothing more substantial than the fact that at the time of his decease his family had lost heavily through the disappearance of certain trust funds for which he had been jointly responsible. Those who cared to look up the reports of a long-forgotten trial might have satisfied themselves that that joint responsibility exhibited him as the victim, not the accomplice, of fraud, and might likewise have gathered from contemporary records that he was the last man in the world to commit suicide through an exaggerated sense of neglected duty. His memory, for the rest, had always been held in admiring respect by his relations at Brockhurst, and a marble tablet, facing Lady Warden's pew in the parish church, credited him with all those fine qualities which it is human and generous to ascribe to the departed.

Whatever may have been the cause of her ladyship's determination to shun her fellow-creatures, she could hardly have found an abode better adapted than the Dingle for giving effect to it. The house, as its name implied, stood in a hollow, surrounded by masses of trees which were never thinned, and stretches of tangled undergrowth which completely screened it from view even at a short distance; at close quarters it revealed itself as a low, rambling building, sunless, damp-

AUNTIE

stained, woefully out of repair and vaguely sinister of aspect. Had it not been known to be haunted, it must soon have acquired that reputation — a reputation which its mistress rather encouraged than deprecated. No doubt she found a ghost serviceable in much the same way as her ever-increasing body-guard of savage mastiffs. A wholesome dread of these kept intruders away; but indeed they were scarcely needed to guarantee the privacy of the isolated, awe-inspiring, miserly old woman from whom neither speech nor money was to be obtained.

To assert that Lady Warden inspired Gladys March with no awe would be going a little beyond the truth; but Gladys was at least not afraid to walk over to the Dingle on a dark autumn afternoon, and not many people in the neighbourhood could boast of so much intrepidity as that. As far as the Dingle itself she did not penetrate, for on reaching the dilapidated gate which gave entrance to a grass-grown drive she found her so-called aunt leaning over it, as if in expectation of her advent.

The strange costume which Lady Warden affected on week-days may have been intended to foster that inclination towards prompt flight which the sight of her attendant dogs was apt to arouse in craven breasts. She wore shooting boots and

BARHAM OF BELTANA

leather leggings, a short, rusty black skirt and a man's coat and waistcoat of loud pattern and antiquated cut; perched upon the top of her head and pulled down low over her brows was a shapeless felt hat, while in her hand she always carried a heavy hunting-crop with a long lash. Thus attired and armed, she did not look like a person with whom it would be at all safe to take liberties; yet that deliberate inspection of her which nobody ever stopped to make might have reassured the timorous; for her face was neither a strong nor a forbidding one. Tiny features, faded, watery blue eyes, sunken cheeks and a chin which trembled incessantly did not seem to justify the character that she bore: it was on that account, possibly, that she always had recourse to a thick veil on Sundays; for she undoubtedly desired to preserve a character which suited her convenience. But perhaps in the case of Gladys March, who was almost her sole link with the outer world, she felt independent of these accessories.

"Well, Auntie?" said the latter, calmly disregarding the bristling backs and ominous growls of the mastiffs.

The old woman drew the gate back a few inches half grudgingly, as if the force of habit urged her rather to lock it. "Come in," she said, in a high, quavering voice; "I want to hear your news."

AUNTIE

With a crack of the whip she drove back her canine escort, and the girl, squeezing through the narrow aperture accorded to her, was at once led into the depths of an adjacent wood.

"And how are you, Auntie?" Gladys began, thoughtlessly forgetting that this very ordinary question never failed to displease the person to whom it was addressed.

Lady Warden immediately came to a standstill. "I am perfectly well," she answered; "I am always well. Why do you ask? Do you think me looking a day older or more feeble than I looked when you were here last? If you do, let me advise you not to judge by appearances. I have absolutely no organic disease, not the slightest symptom of any, and people don't die of nothing, I suppose."

She spoke in accents of such shrill anger that the dogs set up a growl again, and had to be quieted in the customary manner. She herself was quieted by milder methods, and indeed Gladys was able to declare, without doing any violence to the truth, that she could detect no change at all in her aunt. One of the oddest things about this very odd old woman was her undisguised horror of death. Life could not, it might have been supposed, have many ties or attractions left for her; yet she clung to it with a fierce determination which

BARHAM OF BELTANA

often moved her young companion to pity as well as wonder.

"I hear from Browning that you are off to Malta for the winter," she remarked, when she had resumed her slow walk and recovered her ruffled temper.

"Yes; we want to meet Oliver there."

"Ah! — and you want him to meet Miss What's-her-name, your moneyed Australian, there, eh?"

"Did Dr. Browning tell you that?" inquired Gladys, a little surprised.

"Certainly not; Browning is never impertinent. You told me yourself some time ago; though you didn't put it into so many words, and Malta hadn't suggested itself to you as a meeting-place then."

"It would be such a good thing if it were to come off!" Gladys said. "Teresa Barham is a very nice girl; she would be that even if she hadn't a penny. But money is so terribly important in these days!"

"It always was; human nature doesn't change. Money and love have ruled men's lives since the world began. There are other things, such as ambition, and politics, and sport; but they play second fiddle. What does Oliver say?"

"Oh, nothing; I haven't breathed a word to him about the matter."

AUNTIE

"I wouldn't, if I were you. What does your father say?"

"Not very much; but of course it would be an immense relief to him to feel that after his death Oliver would be able to live at Brockhurst. He frets a good deal about the future, I am afraid."

"I can't see what excuse he has for doing that," returned the old lady querulously; "at his age he ought not to be thinking about death, and he has every motive for wishing to live — now."

Gladys ignored this hinted allusion to the late Mrs. March, whom Lady Warden had never been able to endure, and only observed: "One can't wonder at his being more anxious than hopeful. Life has brought him very little but care and disappointment so far."

"All the greater reason for sticking to it and giving it a chance to turn over a new leaf. Let him take example by me and resolve to live. He won't fret himself into his grave then."

Lady Warden's withered face might have passed for that of a woman who had fretted much; but her resolution to hold the grave at bay was beyond question, if it was also a little beyond comprehension. Surely she must have realised that in her case, at any rate, there could be no turning over of new leaves.

"I wish you success," she presently resumed;

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"it is important for Oliver to marry money, and he will be spared many worries if he does. But mind this" — here she stood still and raised her skinny hand warningly — "it is better to be happy than to be rich, and in nine instances out of ten a man who marries for money alone repents of his bargain."

"Doesn't the same rule apply to men who marry for love alone?" asked Gladys.

The old lady broke into a queer, cracked laugh. "Yes," she answered; "but you have no business to know it. Don't say so to your brother, that's all, and don't tell him that it is his duty to propose to the girl. There's no use in her being a nice girl if he doesn't think her nice, you see."

"I am quite sure that Oliver won't propose to her unless he does," said Gladys.

"It may not be an imperative duty," Lady Warden went on; "he may — who knows? — come into money by inheritance or otherwise, one of these days."

Gladys shook her head. "There is nobody in the world to leave him anything."

"Except myself," observed the old lady quietly. "Don't tell me that you and he have never speculated upon that possibility; you would have been hardly human if you hadn't. Of course, too, like everybody else, you think I am rich. I am not

AUNTIE

rich, as it happens, and I may live many years yet, and it is not certain that you and Oliver will get anything when I die. Still, it is probable that there will eventually be something for one, or both of you. I make no sort of promise, remember; I am in no way bound, I don't belong to your family and have never had a penny from it."

Gladys was too honest to make insincere protestations. She had at times wondered who would ultimately succeed to the hoard which Lady Warden was believed to have amassed, and it had seemed to her that her brother's chance should be as good as anybody's; for although there were Wardens in a distant northern country, they were already wealthy and had long discarded, or been discarded by, the Sussex recluse. She only said:

"I think Oliver had better not count upon increasing his means in that way, Auntie."

"He's to count upon nothing," returned the other sharply; "I merely mentioned it as one amongst several considerations which may cause him to look before he leaps."

"He always does — he is not impulsive."

"I don't know so much about that; members of his family have done impulsive things before now. It isn't exactly my business, though. And how about you, my dear? What is going to become of you, do you suppose?"

"I can take care of myself," Gladys answered.

The old woman lifted up her trembling head, frowning and blinking in the twilight at the younger one half-wistfully, half-crossly.

"Oh, you Marches!" she muttered; "some strong, some weak — all as proud as Lucifer and as obstinate as mules! Not but what you are a good girl, and if I cared for anybody but myself, I daresay I should care a little for you. I hope you will marry for love when you do marry; but what is the use of hoping. I may leave my money to you provided there is any to leave; but then again, I may do no such thing. Well, you had better be groping your way home. Any message from your father?"

Gladys laughed. "Yes — I was to tell you that he will undertake to exorcise your ghost if you will give him an opportunity."

"My compliments and thank him for nothing! Does he imagine that I should keep a ghost if I didn't value it? He had heard of that impudent fellow Dartnell's adventure, I presume. I don't suppose I shall hear any more of Dartnell, and it is very certain that I shall not pay for those sheep. I defy him to prove that my dogs had anything to do with their death."

"I should think they might have something to do with his own death if he were to interfere with

AUNTIE

them," remarked Gladys, smiling. "Why do you keep these brutes, Auntie?"

"Because I like a quiet life, my dear. They are cowards, like all mastiffs, else they would have torn me to pieces long ago; but the human race being even more cowardly, I value them just as I should value the ghost, if there were one. I don't suppose there is one, and I don't care whether there is or not; the ghost of a ghost does well enough. Now, good-bye, and if I don't see you again before you start, just bear in mind that I shall be glad to have a letter from you now and again."

CHAPTER VII

The Trysting Place

THE passengers by the P. and O. steamer from Australia, which reached Naples on a gusty afternoon of early winter, were not inconsolable at the prospect of losing Mr. Barham. For although there are many people who enjoy the monotony of a long voyage, with its trivial incidents and restricted methods of passing the time, he was not one of them, and enforced inactivity made him fractious and argumentative. Feeling, as he did, that every day spent at sea was a sheer waste of life, he chafed and fidgeted through the long hours, and was only too ready to pick a quarrel with such of his fellow-passengers — there are sure to be a few such on board every ship — as were disposed to take up a challenge. Consequently there had been regrettable incidents, and Teresa had more than once been fain to offer apologies which it would have been idle to expect from the aggressor. It is only fair to add, as some extenuation of behaviour uniformly aggressive, that Barham was a good deal worried in mind, half-doubtful whether

THE TRYSTING PLACE

in embarking for Europe he had not embarked upon a fool's errand. What he could not doubt was that he and his children were on the brink of new experiences which might very possibly prove momentous. These would, of course, be dealt with and moulded in accordance with his will; he had always been master, and meant to be until the end. Only he wanted to begin; he wanted to take action of some sort, and delay tried his patience.

However, his temper improved from the moment that he set his foot on dry land once more. He did not object to a short stay at Naples, although he thought that the natural beauties of the place had been overrated, and declared truly enough that the climate could not compare with that of Tasmania. If Pompeii and Herculaneum and the Museo Borbonico said little to him, he derived some satisfaction from Teresa's unfeigned delight in everything that belonged to bygone periods of civilisation; the girl was thoroughly enjoying herself, and to provide her with the means of so doing was, after all, one of his reasons for being where he was. At the back of his mind there may have lurked a foreboding — even a stifled, unacknowledged hope — that his daughter was fated to pass the remainder of her life in Europe; he realised, in any case, that a husband must deprive him of her ere long. So he accepted

her programme of a week in Italy, followed by another week in Sicily, and, impatient as he had been on board the boat, was in no urgent hurry to proceed to Malta.

Something in a long letter from Gladys March may (quite unintentionally on the writer's part) have cautioned the quick-witted Teresa against any appearance of precipitation, for she said to her brother:

"We don't, you know, want the Marches to think that at a hint we have come tearing across the equator on purpose to meet them."

"Don't we?" asked Jack. "Does it matter what they think?"

"Yes; because English people, even when they mean to be kind, are inclined to be a little patronising, and if Mr. March attempts to patronise father we shall have an eruption fit to put Vesuvius and Etna to shame. We don't want that."

"Well, no; we don't," acquiesced Jack, with a laugh.

"So we are travelling for our own amusement and pleasure, and we are not going to Malta only because Gladys is there, though of course we admit that as a strong inducement to one of us. And whether we stay a long or a short time will depend entirely on whether we think it a nice place to spend part of the winter in or not."

THE TRYSTING PLACE

"Which will entirely depend upon what sort of a reception your friends give us, I suspect," remarked Jack perspicaciously.

Teresa's friends gave them no reception at all when, after a delightful, lingering journey through Sicilian orange-groves and mountains, with Etna towering always above them, white-capped against a sapphire sky, they disembarked at Valetta. The little steamer in which they effected the crossing from Syracuse did not get in till one o'clock in the morning, and the best of friends can hardly be expected to turn out at such an hour in order to welcome tired travellers. But Barham, umbrageous and suspicious, thought that they ought to have been on the quay, or that they ought to have sent somebody, or that they might, at the very least, have ordered fires to be lighted in the large, but rather cold and bare suite of rooms which he had engaged at the hotel. Accustomed to the wide interpretation which is placed upon the word hospitality in the southern hemisphere, he was chilled by what he took for studied indifference, and, when chilled, it did not take much to make him become fiery. His first impression of Malta was thus unfavourable; nor was he any better pleased when he found, at breakfast-time, that his windows, instead of commanding a prospect of the blue Mediterranean, looked out upon a narrow street,

only one-half of which was illuminated by the sun.

"So this is Valetta!" he growled, staring down at the loitering, many-coloured throng beneath him, at the swarthy, bare-legged fishermen, at the gaily-caparisoned mules, at the women in their black hoods, at the vendors of fruit and flowers, at the priests and shambling monks. "Then all I can say is that it looks uncommonly like a Sydney or Melbourne slum."

Teresa refrained from pointing out how very little it resembled anything of the kind; for she knew that there were moments when it was unwise to dispute with her father, notwithstanding his general love of disputation. For her own part, she felt that she was going to like this ancient little city, with its teeming population, its lights and shadows and its strange contrasts — visible even at a glance — between the present and the past; but it seemed best just now to hold her peace and make the tea. Perhaps she, too, was inwardly wondering how long she would have to wait for some sign from her friend; perhaps she, too, was a trifle piqued by a formality which she certainly would not have displayed, had Mr. March and his daughter landed at Hobart.

But breakfast had not been over many minutes, nor had Mr. Barham smoked half a pipe, when

THE TRYSTING PLACE

there came a tap at the door, followed by the entrance of a somewhat stately young lady who at once acquired Jack's respectful admiration and his father's incipient animosity. Sympathy at first sight is perhaps rather less common than antipathy; yet it is to be feared that the latter, when it makes itself felt, is more to be relied upon as a lasting sentiment than the former, and never in the course of their subsequent relations did Mr. Barham and Gladys March quite get over the displeasing impression which each originally produced upon the other. Of course it was natural enough that the embraces and mutual interrogations of the two girls should prevent Miss March from taking any notice of bystanders for a few moments; still she might, one of them thought, have shown more cordiality than she did on being introduced to the brother and father of her old school friend. Although Jack, whose modesty demanded little from strangers, was satisfied with the careless nod that fell to his share, Mr. Barham detected condescension in the touch of the taper fingers extended to him and was proportionately gruff.

"Hope you don't mind smoke," said he, in a tone of voice which suggested that it would be much the same thing to him if she did.

Gladys, while assuring him that she was quite

BARHAM OF BELTANA

accustomed to the smell of tobacco, contrived somehow to imply that it would have been better manners on his part to lay his pipe aside. The regret which she expressed, on being told that he did not think much of Malta and still less of the hotel in which he was lodged, was likewise tinged by something not quite amounting to a hint that quarters accepted by the March family ought to be good enough for anybody. For the rest, she was perfectly polite, and hoped that Mr. Barham and his son would come to tea at five o'clock, "when my brother and one or two other people may very likely look in upon us." Meanwhile, she proposed to carry off Teresa forthwith and retain possession of her for the remainder of the day.

"I am sure you won't grudge her to me," she added, smiling.

Barham was on the point of inquiring why she should feel so confident of that; but he changed his mind and answered, "That's all right, Miss March. It was more because my daughter wanted to renew acquaintance with you than for any other reason that we came to Malta, and she may as well make the most of her time, for I don't know that we shall care to be here long."

He told his son afterwards that the girl was a stuck-up specimen of a stuck-up, dull, and useless

THE TRYSTING PLACE

caste. "Talk for five minutes to any Englishman or Englishwoman of what they call their upper class and you won't need any more help to account for the British army having been beaten by a handful of South African farmers."

Jack did not ask how many opportunities his father had enjoyed of conversing with members of the denounced class; he only made so bold as to remark that England had not been defeated.

"Oh, indeed!" snorted Barham; "I suppose Majuba Hill was a victory for England, then — not to mention Magersfontein and Colenso? I tell you, sir, as I have told you before, that the Colonies have saved England this time; but we can't always go on fighting her battles for her, and in my opinion we should be fools if we did."

It was well for poor Jack that his patience was almost inexhaustible, for he was rather highly tried in the course of the next six hours or so. His father and he went out for a walk, returned to luncheon, wandered forth again, and discovered that it does not take very long to perambulate the streets and ramparts of Valetta. Nor do these offer any great attraction to eyes which disdain the picturesque and are keen only to descry imperfections. Barham pronounced the fortifications of Malta antiquated and declared that the garrison was composed of stunted recruits; he saw,

or professed to see, that the inhabitants were discontented; the wide view obtainable from the bastions over a rocky, densely-populated country, caused him to conclude somewhat hastily that the island could be starved into surrender in a fortnight; even when he stood on the Barracca and surveyed the imposing fleet of battleships anchored in the harbour beneath him he was moved to no respect for the power to which he owed allegiance.

"Expensive toys," was his comment. "All very fine for purposes of demonstration, no doubt; but what sort of a show they would make against an equal number of Frenchmen and Russians nobody can tell. One naval disaster would make an end and a finish of England."

He spoke as if he anticipated and desired that catastrophe; he would have made little difficulty about avowing that he did. Jack began to dread the coming tea-party and wonder whether it might not perhaps be shirked. But Mr. Barham never broke his engagements.

"Well," said he, after consulting his watch, "we must get back. Ten minutes to five, and your high and mighty friends will be expecting us. I hope young March isn't made of the same stuff as his sister."

"He is rather like her in the face," Jack despondently admitted, "and — and perhaps you

THE TRYSTING PLACE

will think him stuck-up, though he never seemed so to me. Their ways are not ours; but I am sure they don't mean to be high and mighty with us."

"And I am sure that they do. It makes no odds to me; I am independent of them and of everything that they represent, thank Heaven! But if you are deluding yourself into the belief that hospital comrades are likely to meet on the same terms in an English garrison town you may as well be prepared for a disappointment. Nothing would surprise me less than to hear this young spark drawl out that he couldn't recall the pleasure of ever having set eyes on you before."

Jack himself was not wholly free from misgivings upon the subject. He knew that Oliver March was a gentleman, and would behave as one; yet he was a little shy of seeming to claim what March might quite excusably have forgotten. To him that intimacy, begotten of common suffering and hardships, had been an episode of the first consequence; to the other it could hardly have been more than one of fifty similar experiences, heaped together and confused in his memory as connected with the late campaign. "The moon looks down on many brooks," Jack thought; "the brooks see but one moon."

A sudden grip of the elbow, which swung him round, and a hearty shake of the hand, which

BARHAM OF BELTANA

followed at once, dispelled and rebuked such morbid musings. The tall, black-haired, hook-nosed young man who had overtaken him, surveyed him with friendly, smiling eyes and said:

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken in your back, Barham. Well, how are you? Awfully glad to see you again, old chap."

Coming from Oliver March, who was not demonstrative, this meant a good deal. He had in truth conceived a genuine respect and affection for the young Australian, whose sterling worth he had had more than one opportunity of recognising, and their meeting made him as glad as he declared himself to be.

"Yes, I'm on my way to tea with my people," he said presently, in answer to a question from Jack. "You are staying in the same hotel, aren't you? Going to join the tea-party, too? That's all right. Then we'll slip off to the club together and have a good long jaw as soon as we have done our duty to the ladies."

His manner in addressing Mr. Barham was distinctly more ceremonious; but he was quite polite, and seemed anxious to be obliging. He offered at once to put that gentleman's name down for the Union Club, hoped that Malta did not strike him as a very uninteresting place, was sorry to hear

THE TRYSTING PLACE

that it did, and remarked that visitors often found it improved on closer acquaintance.

"I can't pretend that there's much to do; still one meets old friends, or makes new ones, and after a bit one shakes down. My father, who hated it at first, is quite reconciled to his fate now."

"My fate," observed Barham, with a short laugh, "has to reconcile itself to me; I don't believe in accepting any fate that I haven't made or don't like."

But in spite of this rather ungracious rejoinder, he was not ill-disposed towards the stalwart officer who strode beside him while he pushed through the slowly-moving throng which encumbered the Strada Reale. If Captain March was a puppy, he did not look like one. He was courteous, deferential, and willing, it seemed, to submit, without taking offence, to the criticisms which young folk should always be ready to tolerate from their elders. "Worth a dozen of his sister, with her airs and graces, anyhow!"

So Mr. Barham, who had airs of his own, though nobody could accuse him of abounding in graces, thawed perceptibly during the remainder of the walk, and Jack, following him up the broad, dark staircase of the hotel, took comfort. It might reasonably be hoped now that the coming audience would pass off without unpleasantness.

CHAPTER VIII

The First Brush

ABOUT a dozen people were gathered together in the dim sitting-room which Mr. Barham entered, his attendant sponsor at his elbow. He advanced with the quick, heavy step habitual to him, disdaining sponsors and introductions, and extended his hand to the spare, bald man who rose on his approach.

"Mr. March, I presume," said he. "Glad to make your acquaintance, sir. My girl and yours are sworn allies, as of course you know."

"Delighted!" murmured Mr. March, whom it did not delight to hear Gladys spoken of as "his girl," but who had been prepared for familiarity and had no immediate desire to check it.

He begged this burly colonist (so deplorably resembling his preconceived idea of Miss Barham's father!) to sit down, made him known to two ladies who occupied a neighbouring sofa, and endeavoured to start an urbane conversation. But the effort was visible, and the conversation soon languished. Barham, after flatly contra-

THE FIRST BRUSH

dicting one of the ladies, who, on the strength of having known a former Governor of New South Wales, ventured to make some remark about Australian politics, stuck his hands into his pockets, thrust out his legs, and fell to contemplating the small assemblage from under bent brows. Feeling that he was a fish out of water, and convinced that that was just what his host meant him to feel, he was resolute against being either intimidated or conciliated. If these people could not set him at his ease, they were equally powerless, he flattered himself, to do the reverse.

They were not, in truth, paying much attention to him, one way or the other, being more interested in the passing events of their own little world than in any elderly stranger. There had been, it appeared, a recent passage of arms between the wife of a general and the wife of an admiral respecting some doubtful question of precedence, and Maltese society was in danger of being rent into two opposing camps under the respective leadership of the two incensed ladies. As to the merits of the dispute opinion was divided amongst Mr. March's guests; but what seemed to be generally admitted and deplored was that the protagonists could no longer be asked to meet, and that social intercourse must consequently become restricted. Barham listened contemptuously to the discussion for a

BARHAM OF BELTANA

while, and then, in a ringing voice, offered his contribution to it.

"I recollect," said he, "that we had a similar row a good many years ago in Tasmania. A couple of noodles — the Chief Justice and the Bishop, I think it was — couldn't agree as to which of them ought to walk out of the room first; so when it came to their turn to be invited to dine at Government House the Governor was told about it. 'Well,' he said, 'I'm blest if I know which of them is in the right; but it won't do for me to show partiality. Strike both their names off the list! They didn't like that; so they came to terms — tossed up or something. You might advise your governor here to try the same plan.'"

The suggestion was not very favourably received, and Mr. March broke a moment of silence by remarking that these wrangles were not, after all, quite so petty as they might appear. If precedence had no significance it ought to be abolished; but if it stood for something, as he, for one, considered that it did, then its rules could not be too punctiliously observed. That any uncertainty should exist about them was therefore a pity.

"All I know about the rules of precedence," growled Barham, "is that I should no more think of allowing myself to be bothered by such antiquated rubbish in my own house than I should

THE FIRST BRUSH

of putting a literal construction upon the ten commandments."

"That," observed Mr. March, suavely, "though instructive with regard to your domestic and religious views, doesn't go far towards helping us old-world folks out of our difficulty."

"I wouldn't give up a great deal of time to such difficulties if I were you," retorted Barham, with a grim face; "you English have difficulties of a rather more serious kind to deal with just now, it seems to me. Suppose you were to let the soldiers and sailors' wives fight their own battles and turn your attention to the condition of your navy and army, which need it, God knows!"

"I suppose so," agreed Mr. March, "and I believe that public attention is likely to be called to the matter. Is it meanwhile permitted to remind a British subject that we English are not more deeply concerned in it than he?"

The vehement disclaimer thus provoked led to words which would have been better left unuttered. Assuredly they would not have been uttered had Gladys been on the alert, as she ought to have been, to check them; but Gladys, unfortunately, was intent upon watching her brother and Teresa, who were seated together in a corner and seemed to be getting on very well indeed.

In the course of a short but observant life Teresa

BARHAM OF BELTANA

Barham had always found that she could get on with anybody just as well as she felt inclined, and she had every inclination to make friends with this grave, handsome Englishman, of whose prowess in warlike and peaceful pursuits she had heard so much. The circumstance (which was no secret to her) that her friend would like very much to promote a match between him and herself did not set her against him; for, of course, nobody could compel her to accept or refuse addresses from any quarter, and she thought it probable that she would retain her independence for a good many years to come. As for Captain March, he seemed to her to personify creditably enough the average Englishman of good family with whom she was acquainted only through the medium of works of fiction. His personal comeliness was beyond dispute, his valour had been proved, his clothes fitted him admirably, his manners were unaffected, if somewhat reserved, and he had a pleasant voice.

"How like your father you are!" she exclaimed, after they had been chatting for some little time about subjects in which neither of them was particularly interested.

"The family beak?" he asked, smiling. "Yes; it is a prominent feature with us."

"Oh, but I didn't mean in features so much as in character."

THE FIRST BRUSH

"I wonder," said Captain March, smiling a little more broadly, "what you can possibly know about my father's character."

"Well, I have been spending five or six hours in his company. One finds out in that time, if one is ever going to find out at all."

"Does one? It seems rather quick going. And in my case five or six minutes have sufficed!"

"To show points of resemblance, yes. But you may be different from Mr. March beneath the surface."

"I should say that we were rather different in some ways," the young man observed, adding presently: "You don't find my father a person of objectionable character, I hope."

Teresa laughed. "He is delightful! He is just exactly what he ought to be, with his dignity and his kindness and his general aloofness — and the invincible prejudices which one divines! You must understand that I look at you all with the eyes of an outer barbarian who has read a lot about England, but seen no more of it than a seminary for young ladies can show. Oh, a very respectful and admiring barbarian; only a rather exacting one."

"What do you exact, Miss Barham, please?"

"You would disappoint me dreadfully, I mean, if you were too modern and if you hadn't the de-

fects of your qualities. But so far, you are turning out quite satisfactory.”

Captain March said he was glad of that. He might have returned the compliment, for Miss Barham was turning out more satisfactorily to him than he had anticipated; but he was not given to paying compliments, and he had reasons for being especially on his guard in this instance. He had guessed without difficulty what his sister's reasons were for insisting upon the charms of her Australian protégé and, unlike Teresa, he had mentally assumed an attitude of self-defence. It might be, and he supposed it would be, indispensable for him to marry a woman with money some day; but the prospect was so repugnant to him that he wished to stave it off as long as possible. As for falling in love with a moneyed woman, he felt pretty sure that he would never be able to achieve that feat; the idea of being supported by her cheques would always suffice to choke him off. But indeed he was of a temperament rather critical than amorous, and had never yet set eyes upon the woman whom he could contemplate without shuddering as a life-long associate. Therefore he was less at his ease and less informal with Teresa than he had been with Jack, although he thought her quite pretty and was amused by her talk.

THE FIRST BRUSH

She continued to talk and continued to amuse him. If she asked a good many questions, she did so innocently, not offensively; she manifested — and he was grateful to her for it — no disposition at all to flirt; she was evidently bent upon enjoying herself, and he willingly promised to do what he could towards promoting her enjoyment in the immediate future. There would be several dances soon, he told her, and race-meetings in a small way, and perhaps she might like to come and look on at the polo one afternoon.

“I shall like it all, thank you,” answered Teresa with decision; “I am liking it already.”

Jack could not truthfully have said as much. From the background into which he had dropped immediately after his entrance, and out of which nobody had tried to draw him, he had been making mental notes, had watched uneasily what looked to him very like a determination on Teresa’s part to set her cap at Oliver, and had seen with dismay that his father and Mr. March had come to loggerheads. These things added to the discomfort created by a not unnatural shyness. Even the least self-conscious of mortals must needs become disagreeably conscious of his person when ignored by a small crowd. But after a time Miss March took compassion upon him. She crossed the room, looking, it must be owned, rather like a

gracious and condescending princess, to say that she had heard from her brother of his illness in South Africa and that she hoped he was now quite well again. She was, further, pleased to allude in complimentary terms to the behaviour in the field of the Tasmanian contingent.

"I believe we didn't disgrace ourselves," answered Jack; "the fact is that we hardly had the chance."

"You had more than one chance of distinguishing yourselves; and you did distinguish yourselves," Gladys generously declared. "I know that from Oliver, who never says anything that he doesn't mean."

Jack reddened and looked awkward, as he was always apt to do when such speeches were made to him. What he seldom did was to lose his head; yet — either because he knew he was looking awkward or because even at this early stage he had succumbed to a blind and hopeless adoration which was fated to work havoc with his peace — he must have lost it now. For what must he needs blurt out but: "It would be worth while to have lost an arm or a leg for the sake of a word of praise from you, Miss March."

No sooner had these idiotic and impertinent words escaped his lips than he would almost have given an arm or a leg to recall them; but what

THE FIRST BRUSH

could he do or say now? Agonised confusion, mute, unmistakable remorse might surely have won pardon for him from a merciful lady. Miss March, however, showed no mercy. She stared pitilessly at him for a moment, then, with a half-surprised, wholly disdainful smile, made some remark which his tingling ears did not catch, and turned away. So poor Jack fared at least as badly as Mr. Barham had done, and left the room at length with a wild desire to take ship for the southern hemisphere forthwith and never be heard of in European circles again.

"I am sure, my dear Gladys," Mr. March remarked, after all his guests had departed, "you will acquit me of unreasonable prejudice, but I am bound to say that I have not often met with such an ill-bred person as Miss Barham's father."

"If you had attempted to talk to her brother," Gladys began, and then stopped short.

But Oliver said, "Her brother is a gentleman, and it isn't good form to make one's visitors feel shy. Her father, I suppose, isn't quite a gentleman, if that matters. She herself ——"

"Well?" asked Gladys expectantly.

Oliver laughed and refrained from pronouncing any verdict upon Miss Barham. Perhaps he had not yet been able to arrive at one.

CHAPTER IX

A Compact

EVERYBODY who has been in Malta knows those light, two-wheeled vehicles, the driver of which sits sideways just behind the shafts, while his companion reclines luxuriously on cushions, with her feet where the tail-board would be if there were one, and her head in as close proximity to his as she likes to bring it. One uses the feminine gender because, of course, his companion belongs thereto, and one perceives at a glance how necessary it is for a man thus situated to take heed to his ways.

Oliver March, the most circumspect of men, would not, it is safe to say, have been thus situated in the society of Teresa Barham by his own choice; but all the arrangements connected with the picnic, whither she and he were bound, had been made by Gladys, and he could not raise any objection to them when at the last moment they were communicated to him. Nor, as far as his personal pleasure was concerned, did he at all object to that mode of progression through the busy streets of

A COMPACT

Valetta and out into the bare, dusty, sun-baked country beyond the walls. It was now rather more than a week since he had had the privilege of being introduced to Miss Barham, and the more he saw of her the better he liked her. Only he did not wish her to think, and he did not wish other people to think, that he was in any degree smitten by her charms. They had met daily, they had exchanged ideas at some length, and a certain intimacy had been the inevitable result; but the match upon which his people seemed to have set their hearts was as little contemplated by him as it was by her. She had on more than one occasion favoured him with what he took to be a hint that it was not contemplated by her, and he had endeavored, so far as politeness would permit, to respond in a similar sense. Politeness, unfortunately, does not permit anybody to go very far in that particular direction, and Oliver, in his desire to be distinct, may have gone a trifle farther than his fair neighbour quite relished. There was, at all events, a suspicion of pique in her voice when she raised the sunshade which had until then concealed her face from him, and said:

“You needn’t look so dismal about it; it won’t last long, you know.”

Oliver turned his bronzed, clear-cut profile

BARHAM OF BELTANA

towards her, and exclaimed, "My dear Miss Barham, what can you possibly mean!"

"Why, this drive, of course. I won't ask whether you wouldn't rather be driving somebody else, because you would be obliged to say no, and that wouldn't be true ——"

"I always speak the truth," interpolated Oliver.

"Always! Is it possible! But you shan't be made to do it this time. I only wish to point out that I am no more responsible than you are for the way in which your sister has chosen to sort us."

"Then we needn't apologise to one another," observed Oliver, laughing.

Teresa also laughed. She had white teeth, and laughter was always becoming to her. "Between you and me," said she, "I didn't so much mean to offer an apology as to ask for one. However, it is evident that I am not going to get it; so I must do without. Suppose we make the best of what can't be helped for the next half-hour!"

It was not at all difficult to do that. From the outset this couple had been as good friends as Gladys could have desired, and might even have become more than friends, had her desires been less embarrassingly apparent. It seemed to them that they had been acquainted for quite a long time; they had arrived at the point of common and avowed endeavour to reconcile their respective

A COMPACT

fathers; they had found out a good deal about one another, although enough remained for future discovery to keep mutual interest from flagging. And if what they had to say to one another while their cart rattled and bumped along the stony roads scarcely deserves recording, it is nevertheless a fact that each was rather sorry when their destination was reached.

The scene of the picnic which Gladys had organised was a promontory, running out into the blue, white-capped sea, and affording some shelter of boulders on the landward side from the north-west wind, which was blowing freshly that day. Malta is a windswept isle, and those who seek their pleasure there out of doors during the winter months must think themselves lucky if they escape an enervating sirocco or a furious, blustering gale. Dust and glare they will not escape; but then, as Mr. Barham was fond of remarking, the consequences of establishing yourself on a treeless rock are obvious and unavoidable.

Mr. Barham, when his daughter approached, was standing on an eminence and surveying distant objects through his field-glasses. He was in a pretty good humour; for he had, during the past week, got on rather better with those about him than might have been anticipated from his *début* in Maltese society, and Mr. March (whom he

BARHAM OF BELTANA

could not tolerate and who could not tolerate him) was absent on the present occasion, having pleaded fatigue and press of correspondence. He said:

"I have made a fool of myself, this morning, Teresa; I have bought that grey Barb for you and the chestnut for my own riding. They may be worth twenty sovereigns apiece, and I had to give double the money; but I was swindled with my eyes open, if that's any comfort."

It was decidedly comforting to Teresa to hear that her father had effected a purchase which implied some intention on his part of utilising it; for she had no wish to leave Malta, where she was amusing herself very well. She acknowledged with nods and smiles the salutes which greeted her from every side, pleasantly aware that all these people liked her, while not a few undisguisedly admired her. They exhaustively represented the United Service and were many in number — grizzled colonels, long-legged subalterns, keen-eyed, clean-shaven naval officers. Among the ladies who formed part of the party there were but two or three who could compare with Miss Barham in looks, and assuredly not one who could do so in point of fortune. She was, therefore, a success, and she knew it, and her father knew it, and both were gratified.

Human affairs, unluckily, are ordered in so

A COMPACT

perverse a fashion that the success and gratification of one person more often than not involves somebody else's disappointment, and, as the day went on, Gladys March plainly perceived that her picnic was by no means fulfilling the object for which it had been got up. That her brother should choose to devote himself exclusively to the dowagers would have been tiresome and unnecessary even if it had been the result of chivalrous courtesy; but she really could not ascribe his behaviour to that fine motive when another and a much more probable one stared her in the face. Of course, there was nothing surprising in the circumstance that the young men of the party clustered round Teresa like flies round a jar of honey, nor could she be expected to drive them all away for the sake of the only one amongst their number who apparently wished to hold aloof; still she need not have laughed so loudly, or paraded her little triumph so ostentatiously, or flirted, first with one, then with another, as she did. Surely she must know how Oliver hated that sort of thing, and what danger there was of alienating him permanently by such conduct! Gladys herself disliked flirtations — especially vulgar ones — and might, if she had not been very fond of Teresa Barham, have been unjust enough to accuse her friend of being both vulgar and a flirt. She did not go quite

BARHAM OF BELTANA

so far as that; but she was more than a little annoyed to see Teresa stroll away at length from the scene of the feast, attended by a certain gay and unprincipled youth who had been the hero of several local scandals, and most of us know, to our cost, how even the best of women, when annoyed, are apt to treat unoffending neighbours.

Jack in those days was almost always Miss March's unoffending and uninvited neighbour. He gained nothing but an occasional snub by dogging her steps; he was under no illusions as to the utter absurdity of the passion which he had conceived for a woman who did not so much as deign to find him a nuisance; yet he could not keep away from her. It is needless to say that he had not again been guilty of such an amazing indiscretion as that into which he had been betrayed on the occasion of their first interview, and which he trusted that she had forgotten, although he himself could never forget it; but perhaps it is equally needless to mention that he obtained the rebuffs which he persistently and submissively invited.

"Is it," Gladys asked, turning an ominously smiling countenance upon him after she had watched the disappearance of Teresa's sunshade behind a shoulder of rock, "the custom in Tasmania to make no contribution to a picnic except

food? Is nothing in the way of conversation required of you there?"

Jack started and reddened. "I beg your pardon," said he; "I am afraid I am awfully stupid; but the truth is I thought you didn't hear me the last time I spoke, and I didn't want to bore you."

She had not the generosity to spare him an obvious retort, and the poor fellow was dismissed to make himself agreeable to a grumpy-looking old woman who was squatted all by herself under a white cotton umbrella, stimulated to his task by Miss March's assurance that she had remonstrated with him from no selfish motive. The old woman received him in the spirit of the fretful porcupine, but made him sit down beside her nevertheless, while Gladys, after hesitating for a moment, started off in pursuit of Teresa. It was not, as she was well aware, a very nice thing to do; but sometimes one is confronted by a choice of evils, and Mr. Atherstone (the gay youth aforementioned) was known to possess a honeyed tongue. Youth and inexperience must, if possible, be protected against the many social perils of an unregenerate world.

Gladys protected Teresa against nothing, for the sufficient reason that she was unable to discover her. She herself was claimed ere long by social demands which could not be neglected; the

afternoon slipped away; the wind grew colder; the dispersed company began to reassemble by groups; last of all Miss Barham and her undesirable partner sauntered up, satisfaction with themselves and with one another written all over them. Their appearance together caused an exchange of meaning glances between the bystanders which they could not reasonably have resented, had they noticed them, and Teresa, who noticed most things, did not fail to detect a suggestion of disapproval in the manner of those who spoke to her while the horses were being mounted or harnessed. She even thought that she could detect some such suggestion in the manner of her charioteer when she was once more committed to his guidance (for Gladys had taken care that the order of the homeward procession should not vary from that of the outward); but this may have been imagination on her part. Oliver, at any rate, was perfectly good-humoured and took more pains to entertain her than he had done earlier in the day. Not until they had driven some distance did he say rather suddenly:

“Miss Barham, you can’t, of course, know much about the gossip and scandal of Malta yet. I wonder whether you would think it very impertinent of me to warn you that Atherstone isn’t a nice fellow.”

A COMPACT

"So he has been telling me," Teresa calmly observed. "That is, he told me that he was really nice, but that he bore a shocking bad character."

"He isn't nice. I suppose he knew that somebody was sure to tell you about his character."

"Perhaps he knew that you would."

"Perhaps. Anyhow, he knows that what I say behind his back I am ready to say to his face. It isn't exactly pleasant," Oliver went on, after a short pause, "to say disparaging things of a man behind his back; but I hope you will believe that I only want to be friendly."

"I am quite sure of that," was the girl's very satisfactory reply; "you have wanted to be friendly and you have been friendly all along." She continued, in somewhat more hesitating accents: "I, too, should like very much to be friends with you; only ——" She broke off; Oliver looked quickly round at her; their eyes met, and then they both laughed.

"I know," said he. "It isn't your fault or mine; but it makes a difficulty, doesn't it?"

"It need not, though," Teresa urged. "Why should it, from the moment that we understand one another?"

"Well, — if we do understand one another."

At this Teresa laughed again. "Oh, I think we may be excused from using plainer language.

It sounds so rude and ungracious to say 'I like you extremely but — not for me, thank you.'

"You have said it now," Oliver remarked, with a smile.

"Only to spare you from saying what you seemed to think necessary. It isn't necessary, I hope, to distress Gladys by telling her that her design won't work."

"No; I don't want to distress Gladys. And you must not set her down as altogether mercenary. To some extent, no doubt, she is; for we are poor as church mice, and what is to become of us unless I make up my mind to submit to golden fetters I am sure I don't know; but ——"

"But, Captain March, I have nothing of my own, and my father, strange as it may seem to you, would be very unlikely to consent to my marrying a poor man and an Englishman. He might, and I quite believe he would, say that he was not in the habit of paying away money without getting substantial value in return. Fortunately, however, all that is not to the point. The point is that we are to be real friends henceforth, isn't it?"

She held out her hand, which he took, and thus the compact was concluded. Presently Teresa resumed: "As for Mr. Atherstone, he is amusing; but if you think I had better drop him I will."

"I really think it would be better."

A COMPACT

“Very well; and please don’t ever scruple to speak a word in season if you see me doing anything dangerous or silly. I won’t promise always to obey you, because I’m not very fond of obeying, but you shall always be heard with respectful gratitude.”

Oliver was not quite sure whether she was laughing at him or not; but he warned her that he should take her at her word, and added with much sincerity, that she might count upon his steady friendship.

CHAPTER X

Hesitation and Decision

THE Union Club of Malta, held in affectionate remembrance by a large proportion of His Majesty's officers, naval and military, threw open its hospitable doors to Mr. Barham, and thus bestowed an uncovenanted mercy upon Mr. Barham's family and friends. In the reading-room, the smoking-room, and the card-room he met with many temporary members who, if not exactly congenial spirits, were of service to him in whiling away the unoccupied hours which were so little to his liking; he was not unpopular, in spite of his brusque manners, and it happened every now and then, when his children were elsewhere engaged, that he dined at an establishment which could offer him a much better dinner than his landlord was wont to supply. Dining there one evening in company with an elderly gentleman who grumbled a good deal because they were served in a side room, instead of in the lofty and spacious hall to which they were accustomed, he said:

"Well, sir, a club exists, I take it, for the con-

HESITATION AND DECISION

venience of the majority of its members, and if the majority here, being some years younger than you and I, like to give occasional dances, the best thing we can do is, grin and bear it."

"Ah, you have an unmarried daughter," remarked his companion.

"Yes, sir, I am so fortunate."

"Oh, I don't know about being fortunate," the other returned. "I'm a father myself and a grandfather to boot. It comes expensive, I find — not to mention all the worry."

As far as expense went, Barham had the satisfaction of knowing that the luxuries in question were not beyond his means. The worries that belonged to them were, he supposed, unavoidable; yet to be reminded of them drew a quick, impatient sigh from him. He was fond of affirming that the men who complain of being worried are men who do not know their own minds, and he would willingly add that he had always known his. Nevertheless, he was not at all certain of his wishes with regard to Teresa. How could he be, when he was at once so eager to keep the girl near him and so doubtful as to whether happiness in his vicinity was a possibility for her? Sometimes he thought that it might have been better to speak to her about the taint which she had inherited; but that, after all, would only have distressed her,

without removing any difficulties from her path. Although he never owned to himself that he wanted her to marry and settle in Europe, that was perhaps what, at the bottom of his heart, he did want; for he was not, at the bottom of his heart, a selfish man. Of course it had not escaped his notice that Teresa was a great deal with Oliver March, and he did not dislike Oliver. Oliver's father he did rather dislike, though not nearly as much as Oliver's father disliked him; upon the whole he had nothing against the March family, except that they were English, that they gave themselves ridiculous airs, and that he himself had not a taste or an idea in common with them. Provisionally, therefore, he did not forbid his children to frequent the society of these people (Jack and Teresa were dining with them that very evening, and were to come on to the club dance with them later); but he was alive to what might come of such association, and prepared, at a given moment, to put a stop to it. In other words he was, for the first time in his life, hesitating. Some people may be led to think more highly of him when it is added that the question of money did not weigh with him, one way or the other. He was very rich — much richer than was generally believed — and he could, when the time should come, settle an ample income upon his daughter.

HESITATION AND DECISION

Squeak of strings and blare of brass had been for some time audible all over the club-house before Mr. Barham cared to enter the fine, frescoed saloon, which had been converted for the evening into a ballroom, and which may have been designed for that purpose in more ancient, statelier days. The first person whom he recognised in the assembled crowd was his tall son, who was leaning against the wall near the doorway, and whose somewhat morose aspect did not fail to irritate him.

"Not dancing, Jack?" said he, sharply.

"Not this time, sir," answered the young fellow. "I'm not much of a performer, you know."

"Rubbish! you can dance just as well as anybody else, and better than most of these narrow-chested dandies, I expect. You told them, the other day, that you were no good at polo, but I believe they didn't think so at the end of the afternoon. That sort of mock humility is as bad as conceit, and it does a man much more harm. Come now! be off and ask Miss March to give you a turn. She won't refuse, I'll be bound."

She had already given him a turn, if a set of lancers may be so denominated, and she had likewise regretted that her engagements for the rest of the evening were made.

"I am afraid Miss March's card is full, sir," said Jack.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

Barham turned away, with an eloquent snort. Never would he have got on in the world if he had allowed women, or men either, to decline any advances that it had suited him to make to them; never would his son get on by standing aside and leaving action to others! Not that he cared any more than Jack appeared to do about the favour of this particular young woman; only, on general principles, one must assert oneself. Perhaps it was with a view to asserting himself and his principles that he now made straight for a corner of the room in which he had descried Mr. March's bald head and slightly bored countenance; perhaps it was in the hope of raising a breeze for which he had long and vainly whistled that he accosted that gentleman with —

"You don't look as if you enjoyed this sort of thing much. What do you say to coming to the bar with me and having a drink?"

Mr. March shuddered. He always shuddered on Barham's approach, though he was, as a rule, too polite to exhibit his sensations; but this time the man's manner seemed to him so intentionally offensive that he responded in icy accents: "Thank you: I am not thirsty."

"In my part of the world," remarked the other, "we consider that a man who refuses a drink as good as refuses to shake hands."

HESITATION AND DECISION

Mr. March's curved eyebrows were raised and the corners of his mouth went down. "Really? Then I am glad that I do not live in your part of the world, Mr. Barham. You know how charmed I always am to shake hands with you; but if there were a hundred of you, as I suppose there might easily be in an Australian ballroom, I should have to risk making upwards of ninety enemies. In my own part of the world we consider it desirable to remain sober on such occasions."

Barham, who had himself been the most abstemious of men all his life long, would have resented this remark even if he had not in any case been on the lookout for an affront. Frowning heavily, he said:

"Like most ignorant Englishmen, you imagine that the Australians are a drunken people. If you will take the trouble to consult statistics, you will find that we are not half, nor a quarter, as addicted to drink as you are yourselves."

Whether this somewhat bold assertion would have borne examination or not, Mr. March at once confessed that he was in no position to contest it. He pleaded guilty to the ignorance with which he was charged, and declared himself quite willing to believe in the sobriety of the Australian Colonies, as a whole.

"Then," rejoined the intractable Barham,

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"perhaps your observation was meant to apply to me personally."

"My dear sir," said Mr. March, rising, "I should really be very much obliged if you would kindly take my word for it that I alluded to myself personally, and that considerations of health forbid me to drink spirits after dinner. I hope you will also take my word for it that you are most welcome, so far as I am concerned, to drink as much and as often as you please."

"H'm! anybody to hear you, would think I had taken too much already."

Honestly, that was just what Mr. March did think. He turned on his heel and walked off, without another word, leaving his foiled assailant furious.

Gladys from a short distance witnessed what had very much the appearance of a hostile encounter, but did not think it necessary to intervene. The conviction had been forced upon her that her father and Mr. Barham would never be induced to do more than barely tolerate one another, and that, after all, seemed likely to be sufficient for practical purposes. It was permissible, moreover, to ground hopeful surmises upon the circumstance that Oliver and Teresa, who had danced together twice running, had now disappeared from view.

HESITATION AND DECISION

Gladys would have been less sanguine if she could have overheard their conversation as they stood beneath the stars, looking down from a stone balcony upon the Strada Reale. The night was mild and still; the passers-by, black in the glare of the electric light, were chattering, laughing, and gesticulating according to their wont; from the Opera House, hard by, issued a stream of playgoers, some of whom were singing aloud the airs to which they had just listened.

"How delightful it all is!" Teresa exclaimed. "Perhaps you don't think so? But then you can't realise what it means to me or what a long, long way I feel from Hobart."

"You speak as if you were not eager to return to Hobart."

"Hobart," said Teresa, with her elbow on the balustrade and her chin supported by her folded hands, "would be simply perfect if one were old enough to appreciate it. The climate is divine; the view from our house at Beltana is always changing, and always lovely; one has the horses and the garden and the housekeeping, and — I think that is about all. Not quite enough for people of my age, you see."

"Not nearly enough, I should say. Haven't you any friends out there?"

"Well, no," answered the girl after a moment,

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"I am distinctly short of friends out there. Perhaps that is why I want so much to make a few over here."

"You will make as many as you please, of course. You have made some already; don't you think so?"

"Gladys and you, I hope. I must try to add to your number in London if I can."

"You will. And after London?"

"Oh, after London, Hobart until the fall of the curtain. Half a century of Hobart very likely; for I believe I have a magnificent constitution. So it isn't very surprising that I should wish to get all I can out of these short months, is it?"

Oliver's laugh ended in something like a sigh. "Do you know, Miss Barham," said he, "that you make your wishes as clear as if you had put them into words? If it isn't presuming too much upon a friend's privileges, I should like to beg you to look well before you leap. I don't deny that there is a lot more fun to be got out of life in England than in Tasmania; but everything has its price, and you may pay a heavier one than you think for."

"Your notion is that I am bent upon marrying an Englishman," observed Teresa, without embarrassment. "You are mistaken; there is no likelihood of any Englishman persuading me to abandon my father. My father, I know, hasn't

HESITATION AND DECISION

made himself particularly agreeable to you, and, as I should hate to quarrel with you, I would rather not hear your opinion of him; but to me he has been more than good all my life long, and — I think he is one of the loneliest men in the whole world. No; I am not going to forsake my father, and I shall certainly return to Beltana with him when he returns.”

“I don’t believe in anybody’s future being so certain as that,” Oliver remarked.

“There is next to no doubt about mine; yours may be more pleasantly vague, I daresay.”

Oliver shook his head ruefully. “Not if I do my duty to my family. My duty, as I think I mentioned to you, the other day, is to pay those awful death duties out of some lady’s purse. May she be an old and an ugly one! Then I shall not feel quite so ashamed of myself.”

“Because, if she is, everybody will say that you ought to be? Yes, that doesn’t sound unlike you. But it is a rather morbid way of looking at things, don’t you think so?”

Teresa was about to exhort him to imitate her, enjoy what pleasures seemed available, and face the future, with a wise determination to make the best that could be made of it; but before she could take up her parable, her father came stumbling

BARHAM OF BELTANA

out on to the balcony, and announced in a peremptory voice that it was time to be off.

Mr. Barham was silent on the way home, and had nothing but a gruff good-night to offer his son and his daughter when the hotel was reached; but just at the latter was retiring to her bedroom he caught her by the arm and drew her back.

"Teresa," said he, "young March is more often at your elbow than I like. Nothing of that sort, mind; I won't have it!"

"Oh, there won't be," answered Teresa, laughing. "Make your mind easy; it is all arranged."

"What is arranged?" Barham, with bristling eyebrows, wanted to know.

"That there isn't going to be anything of the sort that you mean. I thought I could guess what Gladys was kind enough to wish, and poor Captain March was dreadfully afraid that I might wish it also. So then we compared notes and breathed more freely. Much as I like him, it wouldn't suit me at all to marry him, and he wouldn't for the world marry me."

"Oh, indeed!" grunted Barham. "That's all right, then."

Nevertheless, he could not, as soon as he was alone, help audibly confounding the fellow's impudence.

CHAPTER XI

In the Maglio Gardens

IF, as Mr. Barham declared, it is considered bad manners in some parts of the world to refuse a drink, it is certainly held offensive all the world over to be met with a refusal of what you have never offered, and Teresa's father naturally did not relish the idea that her hand had been declined in advance by any man. He consoled himself, however, by reflecting how much worse it would have been if the young people had taken a fancy to one another, as they might have done. It was, after all, something to know that association with the March family presented no dangers. Between him and the head of that family a species of truce was patched up, the vigilant Gladys taking care that their meetings should be few and far between, and although he now began to talk about making appointments in London for the transaction of business, he was prevented by the exercise of a little diplomacy on that same lady's part from specifying actual dates.

Diplomacy, if ably employed, may accomplish

BARHAM OF BELTANA

much; but Gladys, as the days and weeks passed on, became more and more apprehensively conscious of its limitations. She could not but perceive that Oliver and Teresa were too friendly by half; the unwelcome conviction was forced upon her that they were taking the wind out of her sails by cheerfully agreeing to every little scheme that could be devised for their common advantage, and that they were not really progressing a yard along the course marked out for them. So one day she said boldly to her brother:

"I suppose you know that your attentions to Teresa Barham have been a good deal remarked upon by people here."

"No," answered, Oliver coolly, "I didn't know. I can easily stop being attentive, if that is what you mean. But I suspect," he added, with a smile "that that isn't at all what you mean."

She frankly confessed that it was not. She said that she quite understood his scruples and to some extent admired them, but she asked him to consider whether he was not by his present conduct stretching scrupulousness beyond all rational bounds.

"Don't tell me that you are not fond of Teresa; I know you well enough to know that you would never talk to her and look at her as you do unless you were. Yet you seem to have made up your

IN THE MAGLIO GARDENS

mind to lose her simply because she happens to have money. Is it any fault of hers that you happen to want money?"

"As you may imagine," answered Oliver, "I have thought all that out. I am bound, I suppose, to be a fortune-hunter, much as I loathe the job, and probably I shall perform my duty one of these days, if I can find a victim. But Miss Barham, I am sorry to tell you, won't do. Amongst several good reasons why she won't do there is the conclusive one that she won't have me."

"How do you know?" asked Gladys, quickly. "Have you asked her?"

"She was considerate enough not to wait for that. She has been very considerate, and I am sincerely grateful to her."

Gladys, after staring at him for a moment, said quietly, "I don't believe you are grateful, and I don't believe in Teresa's having made any declaration that you didn't invite. Do you know what will happen now? Why, the Barhams will go to England soon, and then she will accept the first man who proposes to her — oh, there will be plenty of men ready to propose to her! — rather than go back to Tasmania with that gruff and grim old father of hers. For, whatever she may pretend, she does not mean to end her days in a far-away colony."

“So you think,” returned Oliver, laughing and getting up, “that she might prefer even me to the prospect of a Colonial career? I have my doubts; but never mind. As I told you, there are other reasons why Miss Barham won’t do for me.”

He was out of the house and off, at a brisk pace, to attend to his military duties before she could inquire what those reasons were. He might have found them a little difficult to particularise, inasmuch as they were both cogent and absurd; still, the absurdity of one of them did not prevent him from placing it clearly before his own mind’s eye in the course of the morning. His sister, he told himself, was right enough; it was just because he had really become very fond of Teresa Barham that the pursuit of her fortune was out of the question for him; he was made like that, and there was no help for it. But what might have been helped, and would have been helped had he possessed the common sense and self-control upon which he was accustomed to pride himself, was the alarming extent to which the fondness aforesaid had grown. The malady known as love admits of various definitions, and most people, if they were honest, would have to acknowledge that they had suffered from it in a mild form more frequently than they can well remember; the danger is that a slight attack is liable at any moment to develop into an

IN THE MAGLIO GARDENS

acute one. Now Oliver, who was not unaware that he had of late been rather more than a little bit in love with a girl who was out of the question, began for the first time, on this fine, sunny morning, to be beset by serious misgivings. Oh! not as to practical results: these had been decided upon and could not be affected, one way or the other, by his personal feelings. Only it was a bore, to say the least of it, that his personal feelings should be what a few words from Gladys had led him to fear that they were. That sort of thing hurts; and he was a man who, when his feelings were moved, felt deeply. He had not at all liked his sister's forecast of Teresa's future; he had instantly perceived how likely it was to be correct, how unlikely of realisation — though doubtless spoken in good faith — was Teresa's own prediction upon the same subject. Filial piety has well-known and justifiable limits; it stood to reason that she could not wish to be buried in Tasmania for the rest of her mortal life. Consequently — well, consequently she was exposed to perils which he, for one, could not see his way to avert. He could offer her sage counsels, if there was any good in that; but he was not quite so ignorant of feminine character as to imagine that there would be much good in that.

In the suburb of Floriana, just outside the Porta

Reale, is a narrow strip of pleasure ground, known as the Maglio Gardens, where are sheltered seats and flower-beds and a few stunted trees. Fate decreed that Teresa should be sunning herself all alone on a bench in that quiet spot and contemplating the movements of the goldfish in a small tank, when Captain March, clanking back towards the town to change into mufti, came upon her all of a sudden. She was very glad to see him, and she said so. Also she asked him to sit down and drew his attention to the evolutions of the foolishly gaping goldfish, which failed to excite his interest. His interest, indeed, seemed impervious to all attacks made upon it on this occasion, and after she had essayed several topics of conversation without eliciting replies other than monosyllabic, she was fain to ask what was the matter.

"Because," she remarked, "you look as dismal as if you had lost every relation and every penny you possessed."

"I believe my few relations are in good health," he answered, "and I don't possess any pence worth mentioning. I am going — we are going — to lose you before long, though, are we not?"

"So my father says, and it is quite upon the cards that he may be in earnest. But I can't flatter myself that your spirits have dropped so low on that account."

IN THE MAGLIO GARDENS

"Why not? Do you think I have such a superfluity of friends?"

"I should say that you had more than most people," replied Teresa. "Besides," she cheerfully and somewhat unfeelingly added, "we are not going to part for ever and ever, perhaps. Gladys, anyhow, will be coming to England before the summer."

Captain March did not see what comfort an exiled soldier was expected to derive from that prospect. He was further of opinion that Miss Barham, when in England, might stand in need of a rather more experienced and impartial adviser than Gladys. And then, by way of demonstrating his own impartiality, he proceeded to favour her with some of that advice which he had already recognised as useless. It certainly did not seem to produce any great effect upon her, although she thanked him for his kind solicitude.

"The odd thing," she remarked, after they had been conversing for some little time, "is that, with your notions about marriage, you shouldn't yourself have made a bid for the fortune which you evidently think will attract more admiration than my face."

With a slight increase of colour, he said that he thought he had explained that.

"Not very conclusively. By your own showing,

you are not particular, and you seem to have an idea that I am not hard to please either; so, as you don't dislike me, I hardly see why you shrank from making a gulp at the pill."

Oliver shifted his position uneasily. As a matter of fact, he was extremely particular, and this way of putting the case jarred upon him. Perhaps, however, that was just what she had meant it to do; for she went on, with a laugh:

"See how my native vulgarity comes out!"

"You are not vulgar!" he returned, almost angrily; "I wish you wouldn't say such things!" Then, urged by a sudden, irresistible impulse: "You may as well hear the truth; it can't do you any harm to be told. At first I laid my ears back out of sheer obstinacy and because I don't like having my affairs arranged for me by other people; afterwards, as you know, we got on well together and there was a tacit agreement between us which I was in a sort of way bound in honour not to break. But all the time there was something else — not that I knew it all the time, still it was there — which made you the last person living whom I could approach with mercenary motives. In short ——"

"In short?" she repeated with smiling interrogation, as he paused.

IN THE MAGLIO GARDENS

"In short, I love you. There! — now you know."

The knowledge, so far as he could discern, neither pleased nor distressed nor surprised her. She made no immediate rejoinder, but quietly contemplated him, and she may (little though he suspected it) have been thinking that he made a handsome, gallant figure, notwithstanding the hideous undress uniform in which it has pleased superior authorities to array the much-enduring British officer of to-day.

"I see," she said at length. "It is rather unfortunate, isn't it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yes; but I can't help it, you know."

She was silent for quite a long time before she remarked in a low voice, "Nor can I."

"Oh, of course, it isn't your fault! Heaven knows you have never encouraged me by a single word or look!"

"That isn't what I mean," said the girl, who had now removed her eyes from him and was looking down at the ground. "What I mean is that what has happened to you has happened to me, too. And, as you say, it was there all the time, though we didn't know it. And — and a nice predicament we have got ourselves into through not knowing!"

"Teresa!"

She waved him back and resumed, half-laughing, yet with a hint of tears in her voice, "Yes, a wretched predicament! For, as I told you that day at the picnic, I am not really an heiress. Of course, if I were, it would be plain sailing; but I am not, and I think I may say pretty positively that my father would never consent to our marrying."

"I don't care whether he consents or not," Oliver began, with an impetuosity not at all characteristic of him.

Much more in keeping with his customary habit of mind was the realisation of hard facts which caused him to leave his speech unfinished. How could he pretend to be independent of Mr. Barham's consent? His own consent to be dependent upon the girl whom he loved, and who, as he now learned, to his ineffable joy and astonishment, loved him, might be given; but could he possibly ask her to depend for the future upon his pay, supplemented by an allowance which had hitherto barely sufficed for his own needs? Teresa must have divined his thoughts; for she said sorrowfully:

"There is no way out of it; your father has to be considered as well as mine. You can't marry a pauper, and I can't desert my post without leave."

IN THE MAGLIO GARDENS

"As for that," Oliver slowly and meditatively returned, "I don't think that the fifth commandment binds us to make a wreck of our lives. The real difficulty is that I must not offer you a life of hardship. I didn't mean to offer it."

Not until several moments had elapsed did she murmur under her breath, yet distinctly enough for him to hear her, "I should love a life of hardship — with you!"

How many thousands of times has that sentiment been sincerely proclaimed since the human race started on its career of continuous change and repetition? The sentiment is as idiotic as anybody may please to call it; but while it lasts there is no resisting it or its consequences. Prudence, duty, self-sacrifice and other fine things went to the wall in this instance, as they have had to do in many previous ones, and, since the Maglio Gardens chanced at that time to be deserted, the goldfish were privileged to behold a spectacle which may not have been entirely novel to them. Oliver and Teresa knew what they were about; or, at any rate, they repeatedly assured one another that they did. Willingly, gladly, and with their eyes open they accepted what their mutual love left them no choice but to accept. When all was said, it remained remotely possible that Mr. Barham's obduracy would be overcome. There

BARHAM OF BELTANA

was, moreover, just the chance of a staff appointment at Aldershot which was likely to fall vacant ere long. For the rest, they soon ceased to talk about the future, which indeed presented fewer features of attraction than the present.

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CHAPTER XII

Omens

OLIVER was going to ride a pony belonging to a brother officer of his, that afternoon, in one of the frequent race meetings on the Marsa. His chance of finishing amongst the first three was very doubtful, he told Teresa, but he meant to back his mount, all the same.

“And if, by some extraordinary fluke, I were to win, I should take it as a good omen,” he added.

He was much more likely to win a race for which he was over-weighted than to propitiate Mr. Barham; but both tasks had to be essayed, the latter being only put off until Teresa should have paved the way for it. This she did not propose to do before evening, experience having taught her that if ever her father was amenable to pressure, it was while smoking his last pipe. She might have felt encouraged had she known what pressure was being brought to bear upon him daily by his own reluctant recognition of her unsuitability for Tasmanian society, and his dread lest Tasmanian society should proclaim the grounds that it had

BARHAM OF BELTANA

for agreeing with him in that respect. Still, he had not only pronounced Oliver March unsuitable, but had received Teresa's assurance that that young man had no intentions, so it was in a wholly unsuspecting frame of mind that he drove down to the Marsa with his children to witness a series of contests which he compared very unfavourably with similar displays on the other side of the world.

"There isn't a little township in the Australian bush, sir," he made haste to tell Mr. March, "that wouldn't be ashamed to keep its course in such a condition as this. Why, you might as well run horses along a high road!"

Mr. March observed that to make grass grow in Malta would require rather larger funds than the Sports Committee could command. He had been informed that the same drawback applied to parts of Australia; but he spoke under correction.

He was being corrected as amply as he could desire when Gladys, at Jack's invitation, left his side to inspect the horses in the paddock. It was not often that poor Jack ventured upon making any suggestion to a lady whom he feared almost as much as he adored; but of late Miss March had treated him with a toleration which sometimes emboldened if it never deceived him. He knew well enough that the utmost he could expect from her was toleration; he aspired to nothing more

OMENS

and was content to be spared set-downs, which in all conscience, he had only once deserved. If she was more amiable than usual to him on this occasion it was probably because she thought she had substantial reasons for feeling amiable towards everybody. Something undefinable in her brother's face and voice, when she had seen him for a few minutes in the middle of the day, had given her hope; she could not help fancying that her words had somehow or other begun to bear fruit; and although, of course, she knew nothing of his previous meeting with Teresa, it pleased her to see them pacing to and fro together in the paddock now, with every appearance of being what she so ardently wished them to be. She put up a little silent prayer while she watched them and surveyed the smartly-clad ladies of Malta, with their attendant swains, and the gentlemen-riders in their gay jackets and the brown, dusty plain beyond. Owing to a certain frigidity of manner, Gladys March was scarcely as well liked as she ought to have been; but the few persons who knew her intimately knew that there breathed no more unselfish being than she. To insure a peaceful old age for her father, to save the old home from passing into the occupation of a tenant, and to relieve Oliver of pecuniary cares, she would have sacrificed herself and her future without hesita-

BARHAM OF BELTANA

tion; but she did not want Oliver to make any sacrifice that could be avoided, and she was therefore as anxious that he should fall in love with Teresa Barham as that he should marry her.

"The Elwick course," Jack was saying, "is rather smaller than this; but it isn't badly laid out, and I think you would call it pretty."

"The Elwick course?" she repeated vaguely; for in truth she was unconscious of having for some little time taken an absent-minded share in a dialogue which had had Australasian sport for its theme. "Oh, yes, I daresay I should. Where is it?"

It did not greatly interest her to hear that Elwick was near Hobart, or that a horse bred in Tasmania had recently carried off important events in Sydney and Melbourne; but for once she tried to seem interested; for once (being in a mood so grateful towards Providence) she tried to show a little kindness to this long-legged, long-suffering admirer, of whose admiration she could not but be aware.

"I suppose," she said, "you have much the same amusements out there as you would have in England — hunting and shooting and all the rest of it."

"Well, no," Jack confessed, "I can't say that we have anything corresponding to Norfolk, and

OMENS

I am afraid our nearest approach to Leicestershire is running a drag during the winter months. Still, we have posts and rails which take a little jumping, and a man with a gun can generally find something to do, if he isn't too particular. And there is as much fishing as anybody can want."

He told her of the trout, averaging from ten to twenty pounds, that were to be caught in the rivers and the great lakes; he described (since she appeared to be lending him an attentive ear) the mountain scenery of those silent inland regions, and, in answer to inquiries, enumerated the wild animals that were to be met with in the bush — the kangaroo and wallaby, the so-called "tiger," or species of striped wolf, the Tasmanian devil and the platypus, that queer quadruped which lays eggs and has a bill like a duck. This last freak of nature moved her to unaffected curiosity. It was becoming rare, Jack said, and its thick fur was highly prized.

"I wonder," he diffidently hazarded, "if you would let me send you a platypus rug when I go home. I might not be able to get it at once, for it takes a number of skins to make a rug, and I shall have to look about to secure good ones; but if you would care to have such a thing ——"

Gladys was upon the point of declining a gift which, as she guessed, was likely to cost a con-

siderable sum of money; but his eager face made her pause. Why, after all, should she deny the poor boy what would so evidently be a pleasure to him? He really was not such a bad sort of boy, and if, after the manner of boys, he was suffering just now from an absurd and slightly presumptuous attack of calf-love, what did it signify? He would soon be going back to his native island and would trouble Europeans no more for ever. So she said it was very kind of him.

"It is you who are kind," Jack declared, with that bright smile of his in which nobody could well help recognising an eloquent testimonial to character. "Now I shall have something to look forward to!"

He did not dare to say more, and indeed was half afraid that he had again said too much; but, as Gladys smiled back at him, without taking umbrage, he was more than satisfied. So easy was it to satisfy his father's son!

Not that Barham, in the meantime, had been altogether unsatisfactorily engaged. If he wanted to quarrel with Mr. March — and, upon the whole, that was what he probably did want — he had come as near to achieving his aim as that much-tried gentleman's urbanity and sense of dignity would allow.

"Really, Mr. Barham," the latter was saying,

OMENS

in response to a prolonged diatribe against England and her entire foreign and colonial policy, "if you are so disloyal a subject as you make yourself out, I wonder that you do not change your nationality. Why not become a citizen of the United States or of some other republic?"

"No need for that, sir," returned Barham. "I am quite content to be an Australian citizen, and before many years are past Australia, you may depend upon it, will be an independent country."

"I should have thought," said Mr. March, pensively, "that all intelligent Australians were aware of the impossibility of independence for them, and most Australians, I imagine, would rather own allegiance to the King than to the German Emperor."

Barham snorted defiance to all invaders. "We are not afraid of the German Emperor. As for owning allegiance to your King or your Government, can you give me any practical reason why we should?"

"We guarantee you against annexation by a foreign power, that's all. I confess that I know of no reason which you would call practical for our doing that, as I have never been able to understand what material injury we should suffer by the loss of the colonies. There are, however, sentimental reasons which may perhaps count for something on both sides."

"They don't count for much on our side, sir. You had better not be deceived by after-dinner speeches and waving of flags and singing the National Anthem and all that sort of nonsense. A good many of us don't forget how the mother country has treated us and our forefathers."

"Well, yes," agreed Mr. March; "I daresay some of you remember that the mother country was obliged to dispense with the company of their forefathers; but she was hardly to blame for that, was she?"

It was not a very civil thing to say, and, irritated though he was, he would not have said it, had he realised the personal application of his remark. Barham took him up savagely.

"There have been transported convicts, sir, who were innocent of the charges brought against them, and who were honester men by a long way than those who despatched them beyond the seas to be flogged and tortured to death."

Mr. March took leave to doubt whether such failures of justice had been of frequent occurrence at any time. "Can you give me a single well-authenticated instance?"

Barham, who was very angry, had it on the tip of his tongue to cite a case which certainly was not well authenticated, and which every consideration of prudence demanded that he should keep

OMENS

to himself; but at this moment Oliver, on a wiry little grey horse, interposed like a god out of a machine and saved the situation.

Oliver, sweeping round the bend of the course at top speed, was making a gallant bid for victory in the six-furlong race for which his mount had been entered. He had to all appearance been done with immediately after the start, and the contest had narrowed itself to a match between the two leading ponies; but now here he was, drawing up hand over hand, to an accompaniment of encouraging shouts from the excited spectators, and Mr. March, mildly excited, in sympathy with those around him, ceased to pay any heed to his irate neighbour. When nearing the stand, one of the two leaders swerved, changed his leg, and lost more ground than there was time for him to recover; at the same instant Oliver's whip went up and the hopes of his few backers went down. The grey, however, made game response and shot past the post a bare head in advance of his remaining antagonist, amidst loud and prolonged applause, to which, as may be supposed, Teresa did not fail to contribute her share.

Gladys, seeing the girl's flushed cheeks and shining eyes, was well pleased; Barham, who also noted these symptoms, gave a low, uneasy growl; while Jack, whose attention was concentrated

BARHAM OF BELTANA

upon a face nearer to him than his sister's, remarked:

"Fine riding! You look as if you were satisfied. May I congratulate you upon a very successful afternoon?"

"Thank you; I think you may," answered Gladys, smiling quietly.

"Then," declared that altruistic young man, "I congratulate myself, and it's a case for congratulation all round."

Oliver and Teresa, exchanging a few hurried words in the paddock, after he had weighed in, were disposed to hope that it was.

"We have had our good omen, anyhow," he whispered. "Will you meet me in the Maglio Gardens after breakfast to-morrow and tell me how you have sped with your father? I shall proceed at once to tackle mine."

Teresa had only time to answer with a nod of assent; for Mr. Barham's walking-stick, flourished peremptorily above the heads of the bystanders, beckoned her away.

CHAPTER XIII

Ruptured Negotiations

OLIVER, when once his mind was made up, was not addicted to delay in mentioning the fact to those whom it might concern. No sooner had Gladys left him and his father in the sitting-room of the hotel, whither they had returned after the races, than he said, without preface:

"I think I ought to tell you that Teresa Barham and I are engaged to be married."

Mr. March, feeling no surprise, affected none. "It is a pity," he remarked, with a sigh, "that she is not an orphan; but one can't expect to get everything."

"I don't expect to get anything with her in the way of money," was Oliver's somewhat startling rejoinder. "Mr. Barham, she tells me, will certainly disapprove of the engagement, and will probably refuse to make her any allowance if she persists with it."

"But, my dear fellow," exclaimed Mr. March, now surprised beyond measure, "if you don't expect the young lady to bring you money, what

imaginable reason can you have had for engaging yourself to her?"

Oliver laughed a little shamefacedly. "Oh, the usual reason," he answered; "the only reason, in my humble opinion, that any man ought ever to have for engaging himself. I fully admit," he made haste to add, "that it is most annoying and disappointing of me to behave like this; my only excuse is that I can't help it. And I think I had better say at once that I shall marry Teresa, whether her father cuts her off with a shilling or not."

"Really," returned Mr. March, "I don't see how you can. It is simply impossible for me to increase your allowance, and even if I were in a position to double it, there would hardly be enough for you and an expensively brought-up young woman — not to mention possible future members of the family — to live upon. There is no blinking the rather humiliating truth that we must approach Mr. Barham hat in hand; and if, as you seem to anticipate, he rejects our overtures, it will only remain for us to retire in confusion."

"I shall not do that," Oliver firmly announced. "I daresay you will think me an absolute fool for saying that I would rather have Teresa penniless than with a fortune in her pocket; but honestly that is how I feel about it. If you will believe me,

RUPTURED NEGOTIATIONS

I am really sorry on your account. As for ourselves, we shall manage upon what it will be my business to earn."

A whimsical smile hovered about Mr. March's lips. "It seems," he remarked, "that Gladys has succeeded only too well. These ironies of Nemesis would be amusing if Nemesis had not a nasty trick of giving her rod such a wide sweep that the backs of the unoffending are apt to suffer." He paused, shrugged his shoulders and resumed: "At the same time, I don't know that there is any need to take Mr. Barham's hostility for granted. I must own that, in a general way, he is about the most hostile mortal I have ever come across; but he does not strike me as wanting in sharpness, and one may assume that he is not ignorant of what has been taking place under his nose ever since he came here."

"I don't mean to ask any favour of him," Oliver declared.

"That, I suppose, means that you will do as my partner almost invariably does in this new-fangled game of Bridge, which I find myself obliged to learn in my old age, and 'leave it to me.' At that rate, I shall have to make hearts trumps; for indeed I have nothing else in my hand."

He did not in reality think that his hand, or rather his son's hand, was such a very poor one.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

Poor in one sense it unquestionably was; yet he could not, for all that, help feeling that a March was somebody, whereas a Barham was nobody; he could not help suspecting that beneath this Tasmanian millionaire's bluster lurked the Briton's unquenchable respect for superiors by birth. For the rest, it was soothing to the pride which he often found it so hard to pocket that he would at least be able to present and represent Oliver as genuinely enamoured. After the latter had left him, he sat musing over a future which was not without consolatory aspects until he was interrupted by a loud thump on the door.

Mr. Barham, anticipating permission, bounced in with the grim triumphant air of one who has got his adversary down and intends to grant no quarter.

"Look here!" he began, "you contradicted me when I said that many an innocent man had been sentenced to transportation by your so-called Courts of Justice. Now I don't make assertions without having chapter and verse to back them up, and as soon as I came in I looked up some old notes of mine. Here are four instances for you," he continued, brandishing a sheet of paper, "and it wouldn't be difficult to add to their number. First of all, there is the case of Josiah Crookes,

RUPTURED NEGOTIATIONS

banished for life to Botany Bay in the year 1821, on a charge of ——”

Mr. March held up his hand deprecatingly. “Oh, if that is all,” said he, considerably relieved (for indeed he had expected something worse), “we won’t quarrel over it. I deplore the wrongs of Josiah and the others, and I admit that judges and juries are not infallible, although I think that they very seldom condemn a prisoner upon insufficient evidence. I apologise for contradicting you, Mr. Barham, if I did contradict you, and I am not sorry that you should have come to demand your due, as I am anxious to have a few words with you about a matter which is perhaps of rather greater importance to you and me. Won’t you sit down?”

Barham sat down, a hand on each knee and his lips tightly compressed. He thought he knew pretty well what this affable, aristocratic pauper was about to propose to him, and he had his scornful reply quite ready. That he did not make that reply was the result of his presently hearing something which he had not been at all prepared to hear. Mr. March, it was true, fulfilled expectation by stating that his son was a candidate for Miss Barham’s hand and laying claim to disinterested affection on Oliver’s behalf; but what staggered Barham was to learn that Teresa had actually

bestowed her hand upon the young man without asking or waiting for the paternal sanction. He therefore listened in silence for a few minutes, and his voice was somewhat less steady than usual when he at length broke in with:

"I must believe what you say, sir, for I don't see what object you could have in making a false statement upon the subject. But I confess that you surprise me. Some time since I noticed that your son was hanging about my daughter in a way that I didn't quite like; so I took occasion to warn her that I might have to put a stop to it. Her answer was that there was nothing to put a stop to; Captain March, I was given to understand, had told her that he had no intentions. Rather strange behaviour on his part certainly; but he might have wished to clear himself from the suspicion of being in search of a fortune."

"I believe he does."

"Then I can't congratulate him upon the means that he has chosen to adopt. However, that is neither here nor there; for he will get no fortune out of your humble servant. Why my daughter should have tried to practice deception upon me — a thing she has never done before in her life, and a thing nobody has ever done with success — I can't understand."

Looking at his rugged, perturbed countenance,

RUPTURED NEGOTIATIONS

Mr. March felt for the first time that the man was, after all, a species of fellow-creature.

"Well, Mr. Barham," said he, smiling, "I think you may acquit your daughter of deliberate dissimulation. They are not, when one comes to think of it, so difficult to understand — she and Oliver. There was, I take it, a tolerably strong determination on both sides, at starting, to kick against an arrangement which seemed to have been made before either of them was consulted. I frankly admit that on our side there was a desire — probably an obvious one — for Oliver's marriage to a well-dowered young lady ——"

"Oh, you admit that, do you?" interjected Barham.

"Yes; I do not know that there is anything to be ashamed of in such a desire. It may be shameful to marry for the sake of money alone, and that seems to have been Oliver's view. As for your daughter's view ——"

"Oh, you needn't trouble about my daughter's view, thank you; she will have to suit her views to mine. Be so good as to tell your son from me that I decline to do business. I don't, strange as it may appear to him, see that he is any equivalent for my daughter, or my money, and he will have neither."

"I will deliver your message. But he is re-

solved, you see, to marry Miss Barham without your money."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"It sounds rather like nonsense; for Miss Barham, I believe, is not yet of age, and even if she were, my means would not enable me to give my son what I should consider enough to marry upon. But what I was going to say a minute ago was this. The young people, after beginning with a little natural aversion, have most unquestionably fallen in love with one another, and I think we had better treat this as a somewhat important fact, not as a mere fancy. I may say from what I know of my son that he will not change after pledging his word, and if Miss Barham remains true to hers they will marry in the end, whether we like it or not. In the end, Mr. Barham, young people always carry the day against their elders."

"Not where I come from, sir! Your suggestion, I presume, is that, since my hand is bound to be forced eventually, I may as well cave in at once with a good grace, and present your son with a sufficient sum of money to keep him in idleness for the rest of his days. Your anxiety to conclude a one-sided bargain is intelligible; but I don't, as it happens, see my way to oblige you."

"The bargain, if we must needs treat it as such, is not quite so one-sided as you represent it," Mr.

RUPTURED NEGOTIATIONS

March observed. "We can offer social position, which is still a valuable asset in England, whatever it may or may not be on the other side of the world. But I don't care to dwell upon these considerations, or upon the circumstance that I am personally less eager than you may suppose for an alliance which many of my friends will call a misalliance. What I wish to point out to you is that, supposing your daughter stands firm — everything, of course, turns upon that — you will punish yourself more than you will punish her by cutting her off with a shilling."

Barham thrust his hands into his pockets and began to walk about the room. He had no real objection to Oliver, whom he rather liked; he neither intended to cut Teresa off with a shilling nor to make her unhappy; he was, moreover, as has been said before, alive to the difficulties of establishing her permanently in Tasmania. He was, in short, upon the verge of yielding, and Mr. March, scrutinising him with mixed feelings, perceived that he was. But he himself did not know it yet.

"Social position, let me tell you," said he, "means less than nothing to me. The only difference I can see between a nobleman and a navvy is that one of them is of some use in the world, while the other isn't. Certain people may think

BARHAM OF BELTANA

that men of leisure are useful for decorative purposes, but I don't."

With his legs wide apart, he planted himself in front of the careworn man of leisure in the arm-chair, and asked: "Doesn't it ever occur to you, Mr. March, that it is a pretty contemptible thing to be poor and idle?"

Mr. March, to whom this idea had very often occurred, winced a little and answered curtly, "My son is not idle."

"I didn't say he was, sir; he has his profession, and I hope, for his own sake, that he'll stick to it. But how about yourself? What have you ever done, I should like to know, except live upon a property which you haven't had the energy to improve, and moan because it doesn't bring you in enough to pay for extravagance. And now, when a girl who seems to be fairly well provided for, comes along ——"

"Excuse me," interrupted Mr. March, "but I think you are wandering from the point. We are not discussing my usefulness or uselessness as a member of the community, which must be judged by standards with which you are probably unacquainted. But, as a matter of fact," he could not help adding, "my present poverty is not the result of extravagance either on my part or on that of my father, who was crippled throughout his

RUPTURED NEGOTIATIONS

short life by the defalcations of a dishonest trustee. During his minority a considerable sum had accrued, and the estate would most likely have pulled round, had it not been for that rascal Drake, who ——”

“Drake!” cried Barham, in a changed voice. “Do you, by any chance, refer to one Richard Drake, who was a Lewes solicitor half-a-century ago, or thereabouts?”

“The same. I hope you are not going to tell me that he was one of your wrongfully-sentenced convicts.”

“He was not amongst those whose cases I could cite,” answered Barham, “for the reason that his innocence was never established. However, he was innocent. He was my father; so I ought to know something about him.”

He spoke quite quietly, while his interlocutor returned his gaze in concerned silence. Both recognised the occurrence of a catastrophe which compelled calmness, and each at that first moment felt as sorry for the other as for himself. They had been so near a coalition and were now so hopelessly and finally removed from anything of the sort!

“I suppose,” Mr. March began at length, “that there is no mistake about this? I can understand your having dropped your father’s name; but it

seems almost incredible that you should not have connected mine with the — the trouble that he brought upon himself.”

“There is no mistake,” answered Barham. “My father changed his name before I was born, and I am legally entitled to use the one that he adopted. He was always very reticent about his misfortunes; I knew no more for certain than that he was accused of misappropriating trust moneys belonging to one of the county families in his neighbourhood and that he was made a scapegoat by enemies too powerful for him to resist. I hope there is no need for me to say that if I had had the least idea of who you were, things would never have been allowed to come to their present pass.”

“I am sure of that,” Mr. March unhesitatingly replied.

After a pause, Barham resumed: “Of course I shall leave this place at once, and, of course, there can be no further question of what we have been talking about.”

“Of course not,” agreed the other.

Something in his tone aroused fighting instincts hitherto so commendably repressed, and Barham thought it due to himself to add: “What I mean is that I would rather see my daughter dead than married into a family which was concerned in her grandfather’s ruin.”

RUPTURED NEGOTIATIONS

"And what I mean," returned Mr. March, coldly, "is that it would be impossible for me to let my son marry the granddaughter of a convicted felon, who robbed us of £30,000."

"You have the right to call my father a convicted felon, sir; but when you say that he ever robbed anybody, you say what is untrue."

Mr. March implied by gesture that this challenge was hardly worth taking up.

"Now, sir," Barham continued, with rising ire, "I'll tell you what I am going to do with you. You contend — and, as matters stand, you are justified in contending — that I, in the character of my father's representative, owe you the sum of £30,000, plus compound interest at say $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. for something like fifty years. In other words £165,000 roughly speaking. That amount, or whatever, on more accurate calculation, the amount may prove to be, will be paid to you soon after I reach London."

"You cannot be serious, Mr. Barham. To begin with ——"

"You needn't begin, sir," interrupted Barham. "That amount, as I say, will be paid in to your bankers at the earliest possible date. But I do not advise you to spend it; for the moment that I have obtained proof of my father's innocence — which thing it will be my business henceforth to

do — you may be sure that I shall claim every penny of it back.”

“But, Mr. Barham,” protested the other, with a slight smile, “do you not see that this preposterous payment — supposing, for the sake of argument, that it were due, and that it were made — would be a virtual admission of your father’s guilt?”

“Certainly not, sir. It would, and will, be an admission that he was tried and found guilty; it will also clear me from any sort of obligation to you or yours.”

“We will cry quits at less expense than that, please. Of course, I cannot accept your offer.”

“You will have to accept it, Mr. March. Subject, that is, to the condition that I have named. Now, as the most painful duty of my whole life lies before me, and as it won’t bear thinking about, I will go and discharge it. I wish you good evening, sir.”

“Poor devil!” mused Mr. March, when he was left alone; “I suppose his daughter knows nothing about the family history, and now she will have to be told. It is hard upon him and hard upon her; in fact, the whole thing is hard upon everybody concerned. But what a mercy that the truth has come out now instead of later!”

CHAPTER XIV

Big Words

ON the ensuing morning the lack-lustre eyes of the goldfish in the Maglio Gardens beheld a meeting in sad contrast with the parting which they had witnessed so short a time before. The lady bowed and the gentleman raised his hat, as they came face to face on the spot where they had recently exchanged salutations of a nature far less formal; each sorrowfully and silently interrogated the other; both seemed to have difficulty in finding words which must needs be uttered. It was Teresa who at length opened her lips to begin:

“Captain March ——”

“Oh, don’t call me that!” he exclaimed.

“It doesn’t matter much what I call you now, does it? I wanted to see you alone just once more, and my father was very good about it. He said I might come here and wish you good-bye, if I liked, though he doubted whether you would care to keep your appointment. But I wasn’t afraid of that.”

“Thank you; I am glad you didn’t suspect me

of being a cad. But is it to be good-bye? Are you going away at once?"

"Yes; we leave for England by to-night's boat." She paused, knitting her brows painfully, and then resumed: "There are several things to be said. First of all, I hope you don't think that I was aware of this — this terrible secret yesterday?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. If you or Mr. Barham had had any idea of who we were, you would never have come to Malta at all, I presume."

"No; but that is not quite what I mean. I shouldn't like you to think that I said what I did, knowing all the while that I was the granddaughter of a convict."

"Why not? It wouldn't have made, and it doesn't make, the smallest difference to me what your grandfather was," declared Oliver, who attached as much importance to the question of birth as any man living, but who recognised that all mundane considerations are relative. "Most people must have had forefathers who were either punished for breaking the law or ought to have been. But I am sorry you didn't know," he added gently.

"Don't be sorry for me," she broke out suddenly and almost roughly; "that is the one thing that I can't bear! But I do wish I had been told! I

BIG WORDS

think I ought to have been told! Jack, it seems, knew; but he said nothing because my father never said anything to him about it and because he was afraid of distressing me. It is always a mistake — don't you think so? — to make a secret of anything disgraceful. The truth is sure to come out sooner or later, and then there is worse trouble than if it had been acknowledged all along."

"Well, Mr. Barham doesn't admit the existence of any disgrace."

She smiled sadly. "Poor father! No, he doesn't admit it; but he feels it. I believe what he feels most of all is that my happiness has been destroyed by what he calls his criminal carelessness. Oddly enough, your name gave him no warning; he never tried to discover the name of the people whom my grandfather was accused of defrauding. It was enough for him, he says, to be certain that the accusation was false, and now he is going to move heaven and earth to prove it false. I suppose," she added, hesitatingly, "there is no chance of his succeeding."

"Not the faintest, I am afraid," answered Oliver. "I wish I could think that there was; but it would be cruel and useless to pretend that I do. The facts are quite simple, and little or no defence was attempted at the time, I believe. Mr. Drake, who was both our family lawyer and one

of the trustees during my grandfather's minority, had control over certain funds which were not forthcoming at a given moment, and there was no doubt about his having made away with them. Of course his co-trustee — a great-uncle of mine who was drowned many years ago — was to blame for negligence; but he was not a man of business, and he also lost a good deal of money through Mr. Drake."

"You don't think there could be anything in my father's theory of a conspiracy to crush an innocent person and perhaps screen somebody else?"

"I don't see who the conspirators could have been, or who there was to screen. Without Mr. Drake's connivance the money was not to be had, and a man in his position would hardly have held his tongue about tempters or accomplices if he had had any."

She sighed. "No; it is absurd, and we shall only make matters worse by raking the whole story up again. But nothing will prevent my father from doing all that money can do, and he means, as I daresay you have heard, to make full restitution."

"Yes; some preposterous sum which, naturally, we should not dream of taking, even if it were due — as he maintains that it is not."

BIG WORDS

"But, according to your belief and mine, it is legally due."

"Oh, dear, no; we have no legal claim whatsoever."

"Call it a debt of honour, then. Surely, if you are convinced that my grandfather robbed you, it is inconsistent to deny his son the right of returning what was stolen."

"He wants to return it about seven times over, I understand," answered Oliver, laughing a little. "Anyhow, we are not more inconsistent than Mr. Barham, who is bent upon making us take what he declares that he doesn't owe."

"I wish you would take it!" cried the girl — "oh, I wish you would! My father must be enormously rich, for he says he doesn't care a pin about the loss of the money; but to you such a sum would make a difference, wouldn't it?"

"It would indeed!"

"Then why refuse me the only consolation that I can have now? Oh, don't you understand what I mean?"

"Not very well; but it sounds rather as if you were trying to buy me off, Teresa."

"To buy you off!" she echoed bitterly. "I, the granddaughter of a convicted felon!"

"Doesn't it amount to that? Suppose I were to say to you, 'Things have happened which make

it out of the question for me to keep a promise that I made you yesterday; but never mind! here is a cheque which you will find immensely consoling in after life!"

"Ah, you don't put it fairly!"

"Don't I?" he asked.

Until that moment they had been standing a short distance apart; but now he suddenly took her by both hands and made her sit down beside him on the bench which they had occupied twenty-four hours earlier. Although she did not mean to sit down, and had resolved to enter into no vain parley, she yielded — recognising, it may be, with that sense of satisfaction which seems to be inseparable from feminine nature under such circumstances, that she had to deal with a will stronger than her own.

"Teresa," said he, "let us try to put the case exactly as it is. Let us put it at its very worst, and say that we are hereditary enemies, with very good reason for being so. There were strongish reasons against our engaging ourselves to one another yesterday; there are much stronger ones to-day. My father would think that I was bringing eternal disgrace upon the family if I were to marry Mr. Drake's granddaughter; yours would never hear of your marrying into a family which, according to his ideas, has done him a deadly injury, and ——"

BIG WORDS

"And you, yourself," interpolated Teresa, "would hate the thought of being connected in any way with the criminal classes."

"Very well; we will add that objection to the list, if you choose. There is just one answer to all imaginable objections. The question is can we give it? Or rather, the question is whether you can give it or not. Because I can."

She raised her eyes, which were full of tears, to his. "Don't you see," she murmured, "that just because I can give it, I must not?"

"No; nothing in the world ought to part us, or will part us, if only we love one another enough. Of course imprudent and undesirable engagements are broken off every day. People don't die of it; they get better and marry somebody else, and it is all right. But then they have never really loved one another. I am not like that, and do you know, Teresa, I don't think you are either. Let me at least tell you this — and you may take my word as an oath — if I don't marry you, I will never marry any woman."

She tried to speak; but the attempt ended in a choking sob. Then his arms enfolded her, and it was with her head upon his shoulder that she made her broken reply.

"I don't accept your oath — it isn't an oath — only I will gladly swear never to marry any man

BARHAM OF BELTANA

but you. But it is quite, quite impossible for us to marry! The only thing that could make it possible would be for my grandfather's innocence to be proved. And that, I know, can't be done."

If he had not altogether understood her a few minutes before, he understood well enough now that her wounds were too recent and too painful to bear anything but the lightest touch. So he wisely confined himself to asseverations which there was no gainsaying, and left the unquestionable guilt of the late Mr. Drake alone. He perceived that, for the present, he had obtained as much as he could hope for. What he intended to do was to wait the predestined failure of the investigations which Mr. Barham was about to set on foot, and which, in the case of so obstinate a man, might be expected to occupy several months; then, despite the opposition, indignation and dismay which such a course was certain to arouse on all sides, despite his own inborn prejudices, despite every consideration of worldly prudence that could be urged, he would come forward and claim Teresa as his own. If Mr. Barham was strong of purpose, so was he, and in the last resort two lovers who are faithful to one another must always be invincible.

"You must write to me," was the final injunction, "and I will write to you. There need be no

BIG WORDS

secret about that; for we have not quarrelled, and nobody can force us to quarrel."

"But my father is sure to forbid correspondence," she objected.

"Then I think you may fairly say that you won't obey him in that particular. Surely we are entitled to remain friends, if we choose."

"Yes," she agreed doubtfully, "perhaps. That is, so long as it is clearly understood that we can never be anything more."

"Never," answered Oliver, "is a big word; we won't use it until we are obliged. And that moment has not come yet."

CHAPTER XV

Gladys Says She is Sorry

TO mould or meddle with the destinies of other people is a risky enterprise, only too apt to result in burnt fingers. Generally speaking, it fails; but sometimes it succeeds, and then as often as not the intermeddler has to confess that failure would have been preferable. While Oliver and Teresa were employed in getting their joint future into a perfectly hopeless tangle, as narrated in the last chapter, Gladys was heaping figurative dust and ashes upon the head which was responsible for their having a joint future at all. It was a well-shaped head, containing a brain as serviceable as most, and working usually under the sway of an excellent heart; but its owner, in deep despondency and humility, told herself that it would have been better off her shoulders than engaged upon bringing about such a calamity as had occurred.

The calamity, she knew, was considerably more serious than it appeared to her father, who saw in the breaking off of all relations with the Barham

GLADYS SAYS SHE IS SORRY

family a necessity by no means devoid of compensating features. Not having arrived at her father's age, and being somewhat better acquainted than he with Oliver's character, she could not believe that with the latter love was a mere fugitive emotion, capable, upon sufficient cause shown, of being cast aside like an ill-fitting suit of clothes; she understood well enough that, having given his love and his word to Teresa Barham, he was most unlikely to withdraw either at the bidding of adverse Fate. Teresa, it might be taken for granted, would release him; but would he accept the release? Yet what else was there for him to do? It was clearly impossible for him to marry the poor girl, who was greatly to be pitied and in no way to be blamed for her parentage, but who was, and must unhappily remain, what she was. Gladys so far resembled her brother that she divined his mental attitude and foresaw that if he could not marry the woman whom he loved, he would at least never marry any other woman. Now, all this was very bad and very sad — the worse and the sadder because it was directly due to strategy which could plead nothing but the best intentions as its excuse. So Miss March was in a chastened and contrite mood when she was asked whether she could see young Mr. Barham for a few minutes. She was a little surprised by the request

and she did not at all want to see young Mr. Barham; but as her father had gone for a walk, as she had nothing to do but to brood over the troubled outlook, and as she felt too crushed to snub anybody, she answered, with an impatient sigh:

"Oh, yes; ask him to come in."

Jack, looking grave, but not (this she at once noticed) as humbled or ashamed as might have been anticipated, strode into the room and bowed, without offering his hand. He said:

"I heard that you were alone, Miss March, and I thought that I ought not to leave Malta without seeing you again, if you would allow me, and if there was a chance of its doing any good."

"Nothing can do any good now, I am afraid," was her reply.

"Well, I am not sure. But first of all I should like, if you don't mind, to say one word about myself. To explain, I mean, why I didn't tell what you may think that I ought to have told you or Mr. March as soon as I saw how things were going between my sister and your brother. Because, as I daresay you have heard, or will hear from Teresa, I knew the truth all along."

"You knew the truth!"

"Not, of course, the whole truth; but I knew that my grandfather had been a convict, and per-

GLADYS SAYS SHE IS SORRY

haps you will say that it was my duty to make that known to one of you."

Gladys felt constrained to remark that a great deal of unhappiness might have been avoided if he had done so.

"Yes, and I assure you that I didn't like the idea of your being kept in ignorance. But there was Teresa's happiness to be considered, and there was the difficulty of speaking to my father, who had never mentioned the subject to either of us. As you may imagine, I heard about it almost as soon as I went to school; for boys aren't merciful. Afterwards I heard that my grandfather had declared himself an innocent man, and that my father said the same, although there did not seem to be any real doubt about the justice of the sentence. I should tell you that descent from 'old hands,' as they are called, is reckoned a great disgrace with us — more so, perhaps, than it would be in England — and, for Teresa's sake, I held my tongue. What I have been thinking lately was that if my father were to consent to this marriage — which seemed to me very unlikely — he would probably consider it right to say something to Mr. March about his origin. You must not suppose that it was in his mind to deceive you or anybody; he is not at all that sort of man."

"But you seem to forget," exclaimed Gladys in

BARHAM OF BELTANA

genuine amazement, "that my father's consent would have been needed, as well as Mr. Barham's."

"And Mr. March, you mean, could not have stooped to a connection with such people as we are. That may be so; I can't very well judge. You see, it was impossible for me to help knowing that you despised us already, and that your only reason for having anything to do with us was that you were anxious to secure a rich wife for your brother. I could not tell where you would draw the line. I hope this does not sound a very brutal and impertinent thing to say."

It sounded, at all events, very like the truth, and Gladys was fain to hang her head. The young man whom she had unquestionably despised, and who had so strangely altered his note at a crisis which might have been expected to render him more submissive than ever, seemed to imply that although he had done nothing of which he felt ashamed, she was hardly in the like case; and what rejoinder was there to be made? She made none, and he resumed:

"I am sure you will believe that I don't want to be impertinent, Miss March; I only wanted to account, if I could, for my silence."

Gladys nodded. "If I had been in your place, I should have done as you did," said she; "you were quite justified, I think."

GLADYS SAYS SHE IS SORRY

His face brightened. "Then we will say no more about that. Indeed, it isn't of importance now to anybody, except to me. But what is still important — or, at least, it may be — is to find out what course your brother means to take. Would you mind my telling you what I think his course will be?"

Gladys smiled. "No, I don't mind; though I daresay I could tell you. Even if he did not care for Teresa as I know he does — and, whatever you may think of me and my father, you are mistaken if you think that he would have married her without caring for her — he would consider himself bound in honour to keep his engagement."

"Exactly so; I haven't a doubt about it myself."

"Ah; but that does not mean that the marriage is a possibility."

"Perhaps not without the money; perhaps not even with it just now. But if, after a time, the money were forthcoming, and if ——"

Gladys started abruptly to her feet and then sat down again. "I suppose I have no right to resent such insinuations," said she; "but we are not really so mercenary or so shameless as you make us out. I don't for one moment deny that I wished Oliver to marry a girl who was well provided for; it was almost indispensable that he

should. But there is a difference between that and acting in the way that you seem to suggest. I don't know whether you are aware that your father has already offered to pay us an immense sum, which I presume that we should have accepted if we had been what you apparently take it for granted that we are."

"Well, there I must confess that I am rather with my father. Supposing I had stolen your watch, it would be my duty, or, if I were dead, my son's duty, to restore it to you or your representative. That seems clear enough. At the same time, I can understand Mr. March's unwillingness to be paid."

"I am glad you can."

"Anyhow, I did not mean to accuse either you or him of being mercenary. The one and only thing I want, if you will believe me, is to try and patch up some sort of a raft out of this shipwreck upon which your brother and Teresa can make their escape."

"That is beyond human ingenuity, I am afraid."

"I don't think it is. At the present moment Mr. March and my father are irreconcilable; but a few months hence the situation won't be quite what it is now. In a few months' time my father will have consulted lawyers and hunted up documents and found that there is no hope of clearing

GLADYS SAYS SHE IS SORRY

my grandfather's memory. That may not shake his conviction, but it will lower his spirits, and he will wish very much that he could hit upon some way of raising Teresa's, which are not likely to be high. Then I shouldn't wonder if by that time Mr. March were beginning to have a few regrets. Your brother, we may be sure, will have refused absolutely to look at any more heiresses, and the need for an heiress will be as pressing as ever, and it may seem almost a pity to have rejected one whose origin, after all, might easily have been kept dark, and whose relations live thirteen thousand miles away. So then, perhaps, a compromise might be attempted."

"Can gentlemen make any compromise with their honour?"

"I think I have heard that they sometimes do; although they might not describe it in that way. But all I suggest is that your father and mine might effect a compromise with their respective prejudices. When one looks squarely at the whole dilemma, one sees that what divides them is a question of money. My father will insist upon paying a sum which Mr. March wants, but cannot consent to accept. Don't you think that they could both be pacified if the money were paid in the shape of a dowry? Then each would feel that he had, after a fashion, carried his point, and each

BARHAM OF BELTANA

would be secretly glad to agree, under protest, to a match which he had had no choice but to forbid."

Gladys shook her head. "I don't want to hurt your feelings," said she, "but I cannot agree with you that it is merely a question of money."

"The birth-stain, you mean, can't be wiped out. I know it can't; but if your brother is ready to condone it, Mr. March will have done all he can do by protesting. My father, too, will enter protests — and small blame to him, feeling as he does, and always will about your family! But he cares more for Teresa than for anything else in the world."

"It seems to me," remarked Gladys, half-involuntarily, "that you also must care more for your sister than for anybody else in the world."

Jack smiled. "Well," he answered, "I care for her as much as you do for your brother, perhaps. I would give up a good deal to please her, and, possibly, to please him, you might waive your natural aversion against base-born folks. And, as I said before, Tasmania is a very long way from England."

That Gladys entertained a very strong aversion for base-born folks she could not deny; yet it was borne in upon her that there was at least nothing inherently base about Jack Barham. She had to acknowledge that he could be in no sense a per-

sonal gainer by the marriage which he seemed so eager to bring about; she had to acknowledge that if he was not a gentleman by birth he was behaving very like one. She had, moreover, to recognise in his complete self-abnegation something which commanded her respect and almost her gratitude. For it must, she knew, have cost him an effort to suppress all symptoms of what she had hitherto contemptuously designated as calf-love. Therefore she said:

"I will think it all over, and I shall be on your side, and on Oliver's and Teresa's, when the time comes — if it does come."

"My belief is that it will come, Miss March. But supposing that I am mistaken, and that we never meet again, may I take it that we part good friends?"

She held out her hand at once. "Oh, yes, indeed!"

"And would you mind if I were to send you that platypus rug some day? They are really curiosities, and I doubt whether you would ever be able to get one in England."

"I shall like very much to have it, though I shall not need anything to keep you in my remembrance. I can't pretend to feel as sanguine as you are about those two; the obstacles in their way are greater and more numerous than you think, I am afraid.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

But I will do what I can to help them." She added, after bidding him good-bye, "I am sorry."

He quite understood and was quite satisfied. It was assuredly no fault of hers that he worshipped one who had always been above his reach, and was now, if possible, even more so than before; but perhaps she had meant to intimate that it was no fault of his either. In any case she had said she was sorry, and this kept his heart up through the remainder of a day which was not without divers trials for him. When he stood that night on the heaving, dipping deck of the little "Carola," bound for Syracuse, with a painful scene between his father and Teresa and another, only a little less painful and embarrassing, between Oliver March and himself fresh in his memory, he was able, with a sort of triumph, to tell the reeling stars overhead that anyhow she had said she was sorry. The stars winked and the little ship plunged on. After night comes morning; sunshine follows rain; nothing appertaining to this earth or its denizens lasts for ever. But no doubt it is well for us that under certain circumstances we believe in the permanence of certain sentiments.

CHAPTER XVI

Mr. and Miss Barham Receive

THE winter was past and gone, the tardy English spring had established itself with some appearance of finality, the trees in the London parks were green, and the flower-beds beneath them gay with many colours, when Mr. and Miss Barham gave a dinner-party in the furnished Rutland Gate mansion of which the former had taken a short lease. The brocaded and jewelled ladies who were their guests symbolised wealth rather than native aristocracy; the men were mostly middle-aged, mostly fat, partially Semitic and alien; yet amongst the male section of the assemblage there was a sprinkling of youth and blue blood; for the City nowadays has uses for such persons, while the Australian millionaire who had recently become a familiar figure in financial circles had perhaps more than one tentative reason for cultivating their society.

Barham, since his descent upon London, had plunged into affairs with an ardour whetted by the domestic troubles to which he never referred

BARHAM OF BELTANA

and with the pecuniary success which he was accustomed to command. Tasmania was likely to be more than ever indebted to this capable, energetic son of hers. Western Australia had derived benefit from the interest he took in her future; the Agents-General of various colonies had called upon him and spoke of him with due respect. But he had not been, and he knew he had not been, equally successful in other fields of activity; so the ladies and gentlemen who sat round his flower-laden table were fain to make the best they could of a somewhat gloomy and taciturn host.

They had, however, a charmingly vivacious hostess. Domestic troubles to which reference cannot be made affect different persons after different fashions; but with those constituted as Mr. Barham and his daughter were, restlessness is their most common result, and Teresa had accepted what London had to offer with apparent avidity. What she was offered was not in any sense what she wanted or cared about; the England that she was prepared to love was by no means the England of financial magnates and their resplendent wives; still, beggars must not be choosers, and, since anything is better than moping, her days and nights were spent in an unbroken succession of ostensible gaieties.

"Oh, no," she was saying to the tall, broad-

MR. AND MISS BARHAM RECEIVE

shouldered man who, by virtue of his rank as the younger son of a Marquis, was her neighbour; "I am not disappointed. I have never seen the society of other capitals, so I can't compare London with them; but I daresay dinners are apt to be what you call heavy all the world over."

"Well, they needn't be," he assured her. "I don't know any place where pleasanter dinners are given than London, and I've been in a lot of places. But then they must be small dinners, and the people must be selected with a certain amount of care. Of course this sort of thing," — and he shrugged his shoulders expressively.

Teresa laughed. "Thank you; you are very flattering. One can't help humbly wondering why you come to this sort of thing."

"I am sure you know why," he returned, in nowise disconcerted. "Besides, your father has been awfully kind in giving me tips."

"For which your presence here ought to be taken as payment in full, I suppose. How horrid it must be for you! Did you ever see any of these people before in your life?"

"Oh, bless your soul, yes! — and hope to have the honour of dining in their company often again. But — they're rather undiluted to-night, aren't they?"

He was a very decent, good-humoured, impe-

BARHAM OF BELTANA

cunious fellow, who had served as A.D.C. to a couple of Viceroy, had been employed on the staff during the Boer campaign, and was now open to engagements, matrimonial or other. Barham, whose contempt for men of his type was usually outspoken, had picked him up and held on to him with an intention visible, futile and not without pathos in his daughter's eyes. She said:

"I suppose they are; but you must remember that we are a very new firm of distillers. Perhaps if we were to persevere with the business for another year or two, we should be able to provide you with something more palatable."

"Oh, I'm right enough," Lord John Stourton was kind enough to declare; "I've got all I want, thanks. But it seems such an awful pity that you should take a house for the season only to go about with people who aren't really people at all."

"Not even human, poor things? Well, I should like very much to go about with the people who are; but how is it to be done?"

Lord John assured her that he could manage that for her quite easily. He had a mother, as well as aunts and other relatives, who would be only too delighted to be of social service to Miss Barham. "And just now," he ingenuously added, "the mere fact of your being an Australian gives you an immense pull, because we are all overflow-

MR. AND MISS BARHAM RECEIVE

ing with gratitude to the Colonies and affection for them."

He described the sort of society which suited his own tastes best, and of which he thought that she ought to have a glimpse — the little Bridge parties, the dinners at restaurants, the expeditions by motor-car to hospitable country houses within reach of London. But he was prepared to make further concessions to an unsatiated appetite, and if she cared for balls and squashes "and all that," he would procure her the requisite cards.

She was diverted by his artless talk, she found him a little more amusing than the other guests, and resumed her conversation with him in the drawing-room after dinner. She did not, however, neglect those other guests; for, untutored though she was, she had a natural gift for entertaining and took more trouble about it than is customary in these days. So she moved hither and thither, and had a word for everybody, and seemed to be as pleased as she was pleasing. But her father, watching her all the time from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, was not taken in. She had used language before leaving Malta, which, although it had not been repeated, had not been recalled, and well he knew that her recent amenability must not be construed as surrender. What was the use of telling her by implication that there

BARHAM OF BELTANA

are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it? Some women, perhaps, are like children and may be consoled for the loss of a toy by the gift of a new one; but Teresa was not that sort of woman. In truth he had hardly meant to propose Lord John, or any other young Englishman, to her as a substitute for the inadmissible Oliver March; his hope had been rather that their company might help to obscure memories which she ought to be using every effort to put away from her. And even of that result he could not feel very sanguine.

"Come and smoke a pipe, Jack," he said to his son, after the diners had gone away and Teresa had retired upstairs to read over again the last letter that she had received from Oliver. "I must have tobacco to get the taste of those rascals out of my mouth."

"Are they rascals?" asked Jack, following his father into the study which he was seldom invited to enter.

Mr. Barham did not reply. He lighted his pipe, at which he puffed slowly for some moments, lost in gloomy meditation and apparently oblivious of his son's presence.

"Eh? — rascals?" he said at length. "No, not all of them. In business it's pretty safe to assume that nine men out of ten will try to get the better of you; but some of these financiers are

MR. AND MISS BARHAM RECEIVE

moderately honest, I daresay. Anyhow, they don't get the better of me, and I don't know that I should bear much malice if they did. I'm getting sick of the whole business of money-making," he added, suddenly. "I'm getting sick of everything, Jack."

"That isn't like you, sir," Jack remarked.

"Isn't it? Well, no; it is rather more like you perhaps. Are you as sick of old Beltana as your sister is, I wonder?"

Jack thought he had better not answer for his sister; but on his own account he made brave reply, "I'm ready for Beltana whenever you please, sir."

"That's a good job; for my business here is all but completed. Maybe you know that I have failed in what is of more consequence to me than floating any number of new companies."

Jack shook his head.

"I thought you might have been talking to the lawyers. I shouldn't have objected to your talking to them, if you had been sufficiently interested in a wild-geese chase to consider it worth your while. Well, you probably expected me to fail; so you won't be surprised to hear that there is nothing more to be done. We have routed out every scrap of evidence, and the upshot is that your grandfather must have been privy to a fraud.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

I don't say, mind you, that he filled his own pocket. he seems to have been pretty nearly ruined at the time of the smash. The real culprit may have been that co-trustee of his, or some other scoundrel who is dead and gone; but there's no evidence to be had. It all took place too long ago."

He sighed as he spoke, and there was something in his voice which sounded almost like an appeal for sympathy; but Jack, not venturing to express any, merely remarked:

"At all events, you have made every reparation that could be made."

"Yes; the money lies at Mr. March's bankers, and I hold their receipt for it. They were instructed by him to return it to me; but I gave my bankers instructions to refuse payment from them; so there it remains. He will end by taking it, I suspect."

"I don't think he will, sir," said Jack.

"What do you know about it? But it's all one to me; let him devote the amount to charity or to the reduction of the National Debt, if he likes. As you say, I have done all that was in my power, and I owe no further reparation to anybody."

"Unless to Teresa, perhaps," observed Jack, whose opportunity seemed to have come.

Barham groaned. "Ah, there you hit me on the raw! I hate a man who pleads that he acted

MR. AND MISS BARHAM RECEIVE

for the best; but I suppose you know that I did act for the best, as it appeared to me. How was I to foresee that such an out-of-the-way calamity would come to pass? It has come to pass, though, and I am to blame for it, and — I can't help it!"

He began to walk about, with his hands in his pockets. "I am not a fool; I can guess what you have in your mind; it's a soft, amiable sort of mind. I'm not quite so sure about what she has in hers; I hoped she would have had more pride. But women will be women; it has been the same old story with them over and over again since they were first created to worry the world and people it. And what the devil am I to do, I should like to know? Do you imagine that if I were to go to Mr. March now, hat in hand, and beg him to let his son marry my daughter, he would do it? Not he! He may, after a time, consent to pocket money which he thinks is owing to him; but he will never pocket what he would look upon as a disgrace to his family. I have no affection for the man, nor much respect for his antiquated code of honour; but I'll say for him that, such as it is, I believe he'll stick to it."

"I think you are mistaken, sir," said Jack; "I think the great difficulty with him will be to get him to pocket the money. If he were once pre-

vailed upon to accept payment he would feel that the ground was cut from under his feet."

"Oh, that's your opinion, is it? Then let me tell you this, Jack. Supposing Mr. March were to come to me, instead of my going to him, and were to entreat me to give my daughter to his son, my answer would be that I would sooner blow my brains out. I needn't tell you that I would do a good deal and submit to a good deal for Teresa; I've been trying to do what I could for her in more ways than one, as no doubt you are aware. But I couldn't let her marry young March even if he wished it — which I'm pretty sure that he doesn't in his heart. Had I been able to prove that your grandfather was what I am still convinced that he was, more sinned against than sinning, the case might have been different. I shouldn't have liked the match; but I suppose I should have done the other thing. As it is, she may blame me — I have admitted that I hold myself to blame — and she may command me in any way she chooses, save one; but she must not ask for what is impossible. I don't want to have to say all this to her; it is better, for her own sake, as well as for mine, that we shouldn't come to words about it. But it strikes me that you might warn her against nursing hopes which can only end in disappointment."

MR. AND MISS BARHAM RECEIVE

"I will if you wish, sir," answered the discreet and laconic Jack.

"I do wish it. Now be off to bed; and remember that what I have said to you is what I mean."

There could be no question about his meaning it, and he was as obstinate a man as ever lived. Yet, Jack sapiently reflected, when two legs cross, one or the other must needs break. So despite his promise, he did not consider himself bound to offer his sister counsels of despair.

CHAPTER XVII

The Approach of Peace

THE Dingle ghost, like Vesuvius, had alternate periods of quiescence and activity, and since Dartnell's adventure in the early winter it had, so far as was known, troubled nobody. With the advent of spring, however, came reports of renewed manifestations, all well authenticated, and some of an entirely novel character. The postman, a man of proved courage and sobriety, deposed that, when calling at the haunted house in the discharge of his duty, he had heard proceeding from within it unearthly groans, "fit to freeze the blood in your veins"; the Rector's stable-boy made oath and said that, having been despatched, much against his will, with a note to her ladyship one evening, he had beheld at an upper window a huge, sheeted figure with a flowing white beard and eyes like red-hot coals. At this he had gazed spellbound for the space of five minutes (reduced under cross-examination to two), when it had slowly faded away, the awful eyes of it lingering after other details had become indistinguish-

THE APPROACH OF PEACE

able. Still more significant, if less precise, was the testimony of Martha Pattens, recently employed as charwoman in an establishment which few who valued their peace of mind would have cared to join even in that occasional capacity. Martha, who had doubtlessly been handsomely paid to hold her tongue, was reticent; yet she could not, when pressure was brought to bear on her, refrain from certain oracular utterances.

"There's more goes on in that 'ouse, mum," she would say, "nor what I should like for to mention to you. I'm not one to gossip about what don't consarn me, nor yet I ain't no call to fear man nor devil, havin' allus kep' myself respectable and done unto others as I would they should do unto me, accordin' to the catechism; but I wouldn't sleep under that roof, not if I was offered five golden suvrins for it, and so I told 'em. 'Washin' up by daylight and lightin' of the kitching fire of a mornin' as much as you please,' I says; 'but no night work for me! Maybe you're used to it and can bear it,' I says; 'but my conscience will not let me go so fur, and that's flat!'"

Now, all this, taken in conjunction with the facts that Lady Warden had not been seen in church for two consecutive Sundays and that Dr. Browning was known to be in constant attendance at the Dingle, pointed to a conclusion sufficiently ob-

vious. Whatever might be the spectre's mission on earth, it was probably, like the mission of most spectres, associated with the departure of some mortal from earthly scenes, and nobody doubted that the old lady was at last going to die.

The theory was a plausible one; but it was scarcely supported by Lady Warden's aspect, as she sat, on a fine, warm morning, in the small ground-floor room which she was wont to share with her attendant mastiffs. She did not look ill, nor did her frail person show any diminution of such strength as it retained; her withered hands, it is true, shook, as they held the letter that she was perusing, but her hands always shook; the only change that might possibly have been noticed in her, if there had been anybody to notice it, was a vague suggestion of increased calm about the set of her features. She was reading Gladys's last letter from Malta, which had reached her some time before, and she had been reading over again several previous ones, to which she had made no reply.

"Yes," she muttered to herself; "yes, yes." And then, "I suppose I shall have to see this man Barham, as he calls himself; but not yet — not yet. He may give trouble; all will depend, of course, upon whether he is as devoted to his daughter as Gladys says he is or not. I wonder if his

THE APPROACH OF PEACE

daughter is at all like a lady. Not that that will make much difference to Philip in his present mood. But poor Philip's mood will have to change. Well, they will be home shortly, it seems."

She stroked the head of the mastiff who lay at her feet, and who looked up at her from beneath his wrinkled forehead. "Little more need for you now," said she; "little more need for me either! It's a pity that there was ever need for either of us; but that isn't our fault."

The dog raised himself on his forepaws with a low growl; his quick ear had caught the sound of an approaching footstep outside which had not reached his mistress's duller hearing. Presently a middle-aged, brown-bearded man appeared at the open window and stepped into the room with the air of one to whom that unceremonious method of ingress was habitual.

"You are rather late this morning, Browning," the old lady remarked.

"Yes," he answered; "my hands are rather fuller than usual. Is there any change to report?"

She shook her head. "None to speak of. He sleeps a great deal and takes less nourishment; but he doesn't complain of pain or discomfort now."

"H'm! — that is scarcely a hopeful sign."

"We are not anxious for hopeful signs, he and I."

Dr. Browning nodded, surveying the old woman with kindly, compassionate eyes. He was upon the point of making some observation, but thought better of it, and only said, "I'll go upstairs and see him."

After he had left the room Lady Warden glanced once more at Gladys's letters, then folded them up and thrust them into her skirt pocket. She seemed to be thinking hard, and exhibited no impatience at the doctor's protracted absence. Nor did she appear to be perturbed when at length he returned with the announcement that the patient was slowly sinking.

"There is absolutely nothing to be done; it is a question of weeks at the outside. I should say of days if it were not for his extraordinary vitality."

"So I supposed. Sit down, Browning; you have something to say to me, haven't you?"

"Well, Lady Warden," answered the doctor, drawing up a chair, "I ought to know what your wishes are and to comply with them as far as I can. You will admit that I have not been inquisitive or indiscreet all this long time."

"You have been admirable in every respect. What I should have done without you I can't think, and you will find, when I die, that I have not forgotten you."

THE APPROACH OF PEACE

Dr. Browning laughed. "Oh, you must not make bequests to your medical attendant. I have been paid for my services, which have been very willingly given. But before long there will be certain indispensable formalities ——"

"Of course there will," she interrupted; "did you suppose that I hadn't thought of all that? You will have to sign a certificate and people will have to be told. Not a great many people, perhaps — the Rector and Philip March, and one or two others. Philip is coming home, which will simplify things in some respects."

"Yes," agreed Dr. Browning, rather dubiously; "but if it is not asking too much, what are they to be told?"

"Just what you know, Browning; the name of the deceased and the fact that he has been for many years an unsuspected inmate of this house. Well, no; as it happens, Philip will be told rather more than that; but I imagine that the law can't compel me to say more."

"I hope not, Lady Warden. I have asked no questions, and such surmises as have occurred to me may be quite incorrect. But as it is evident that absolute secrecy will no longer be possible, I am afraid you must be prepared for a sensation amongst your neighbours, as well as for a great deal of troublesome curiosity."

The old lady made a gesture of supreme contempt. "Pooh!—they and their curiosity! I don't keep dogs for nothing. Let them think what they please and say what they please; they won't come here to bother me."

"You have great courage, I know," observed the doctor, musingly.

"My dear Browning, you are probably the only person who knows that I am a rank coward."

"With regard to one thing alone, Lady Warden."

"Well, that one thing has ceased to be a terror to me, you will be glad to hear. It was a down-right necessity that I should not die before he did; but I have been kept alive, thanks to you, and I should think you must have guessed that I never clung to life for its own sake."

It would have been strange if she had; but all doctors are familiar with that fierce, ineradicable love of sheer existence which often survives everything that might seem to render existence tolerable. Dr. Browning knew singularly little about the old woman whom he had attended for so long, who had bestowed no more of her confidence upon him than she could help, and whom he had so sincerely pitied. He was sorry for her now, though she did not appear to be sorry for herself, and he began to ask a few questions about her health, which she brusquely waved aside.

THE APPROACH OF PEACE

"Oh, I'm well enough; I daresay I shall be better now that it doesn't matter any more. You have been a good friend to me, Browning; rejoice with me that it doesn't matter any more!"

She held out her hand to him; it was the very first time that she had done so throughout their long intercourse. She belonged to a generation which has passed away, with its ideas and customs; since her youth she had seen nothing of a changing world; almost her only link with it had been this man, whom she liked and to whom she was deeply grateful, although she habitually addressed him by his surname, without prefix, and never thought of regarding him otherwise than as a social inferior. Even now she saw no reason for enlightening him as to matters which concerned his betters. But she was glad to shake hands with him.

"I will take care that everything shall be in order when the time comes," said she. "I would send for the Rector, but I doubt if he" — she pointed upwards — "would stand that."

She sighed, rose slowly and stiffly, and glanced towards the window; whereupon Dr. Browning, understanding that he was dismissed, left as he had come.

The old lady then resumed her seat and her meditations. These, as is so often the case with

people who lead solitary lives, were articulate, and she knew that they were not likely to be interrupted by the old and trustworthy servants who ministered to her wants.

"Yes," she murmured, "it all works out — it works out. Things will be said, no doubt; but as he has frequently told me, he won't care what is said about him after he is gone, and he is safe now. The man Barham is an obstacle — or may be one. Persons of his class can be dealt with, though; there should be no insuperable difficulty about hushing up what everybody must wish to hush up."

Her acquaintance with persons of Mr. Barham's class was scarcely on a par with her capacity for dealing with those who belonged to her own. She mentally dismissed him after as cavalier a fashion as that in which she had dismissed good Dr. Browning, having no further need for his company at the moment, nor any immediate desire to be troubled with him. Other matters, to judge from the shadows which swept across her time-worn, pathetic face, were troubling her a little; yet between and through them there shone always the light of an acquired peace; for the great trouble of her long life was now practically at an end. She gazed round at the shabby little room, the shabby old furniture, the patched carpet — sym-

THE APPROACH OF PEACE

bols of those rigid economies which had become her second nature — and drew a long breath. She might have exclaimed *Domine, nunc dimittis*; only she was a religious woman, and she felt that such words would savour of profanity, coming from the accomplice of one who lay dying overhead.

After a time she got up, tottered over to the writing-table of which she so seldom made use and proceeded, with cramped, trembling fingers, to indite the following lines:

You are not to suppose, my dear Gladys, that your kindness and consideration in complying with my request that you should keep me informed of your welfare have found me indifferent. If I have been remiss in neglecting to reply to your several letters, this must be ascribed in part to the circumstance that it has become difficult and laborious to me to manipulate a pen, and in part to my having been of late much occupied with tasks which could not be delegated to others.

I have read all that you have had to tell me with interest and sympathy. Especially glad was I to learn of your brother's having conceived an unfeigned attachment to the young lady whom your sisterly solicitude singled out as fit to be his bride; for I remain of opinion that in the formation and maintenance of such attachments lies our best chance of happiness here below.

The very surprising discovery of which I am informed in your more recent letters, together with the abandonment of your scheme which could not but be its first result, is doubtless a matter for regret; yet I am not prepared to say that the misfortune, if such it be, is an irreparable

BARHAM OF BELTANA

one. I must, in any event, applaud Oliver's honourable view that his word is engaged, in addition to his affections, and that no misdeeds on the part of relatives should suffice to separate those who are themselves blameless.

I hope ere long to enlarge more fully with you upon this and other subjects, and I therefore beg that you will lose no time in visiting me on your return home. Meanwhile, pray convey my regards to your father, and believe me, my dear Gladys, —

Your sincerely affectionate aunt,

MATILDA WARDEN.

There was, it will be perceived, a good deal of difference between Lady Warden's epistolary and her colloquial style; but her disinclination to commit herself was as apparent in the one as in the other. She read over what she had written, said to herself that it would do, and addressed it to the London hotel at which Mr. March was wont to put up during his brief and rare visit to the metropolis.

CHAPTER XVIII

Courteous Inflexibility

THAT absence makes the heart grow fonder is a saying to which experience can give but a very hesitating assent. Upon the whole, absence is far more likely to produce the contrary effect, and if Oliver March and Teresa Barham did not think so, this may only have been because their separation had not yet lasted long enough to enable them to judge. On the other hand, one is often surprised to find how much one misses people whose presence, while they were with us, has seemed to be a thing of no consequence at all. Thus, after the Barhams had left Malta, Gladys made the discovery that she had really had a sort of weakness for the long-legged young man whom she had treated and regarded as a negligible quantity. It was true that her last interview had caused her to modify her previous opinion of him in some important respects, and had compelled her to credit him with qualities which everybody must admire when they are exhibited; but quite apart from that, his withdrawal seemed to create an

BARHAM OF BELTANA

unexpected blank in her daily life. There had been something comforting about him, something trustworthy; he had been very good and patient, too, poor fellow, very devoted, after his unobtrusive, entirely hopeless fashion. Perhaps also no woman can be wholly insensible to a certain order of devotion, be it never so humble, never so inadmissible. There actually came a moment when Gladys asked herself whether she might not be a little bit — just the least little bit — in love with the young colonist whose honest, pleasant countenance she would in all probability never see again. But she put away that fantastic notion with a laugh satisfactorily heart-whole.

No; she was certainly not enamoured of poor Jack; she was only sorry that she had not shown him more kindness, which would have cost her nothing and might have rendered him comparatively happy.

Meanwhile, she herself was very far from happy, being plagued, for reasons good and bad, by daily pangs of remorse. In common fairness she could not be blamed because it had turned out that Mr. Barham's name was Drake and that he was the son of a convict; yet she had unquestionably been instrumental in bringing about a state of things nothing short of disastrous. Here was Oliver, quietly but inexorably bent upon doing an impos-

COURTEOUS INFLEXIBILITY

sible thing; here was her father, magnanimously abstaining from reproaches and declaring himself rejoiced to have done forever with a man whose every word and action had jarred upon him, yet perceptibly harassed by the old cares and problems; yonder was the Brockhurst estate, crying aloud in the midst of its own wilderness for rescue from ruin. Well might poor Gladys exclaim, "A nice mess I have made of it all!"

The reflection that she was now powerless for good or for ill, and that an expectant attitude was the only one possible to her, gave her little comfort. What to expect she could not tell, nor did she receive much enlightenment from her father or her brother. The former, indeed, disliked and discouraged any allusion to the Barham family; so it was not until he and she had reached London on their homeward journey and were established in the Jermyn Street hotel where they were to spend a couple of nights, that she took heart of grace and asked:

"Would you mind if I were to go and see Teresa?"

"You have her address, then?" Mr. March returned. "Well, since you asked me, I must confess that I don't see what good your calling upon Miss Barham will do."

"But it would do no harm, would it? We

haven't quarrelled, she and I, and you must admit that she has behaved as well as any girl in her painful position could."

"I am not sure that I call her corresponding with you—not to mention Oliver—quite good behaviour. But I don't advocate a quarrel; under all the circumstances, that would perhaps be a counsel of perfection. I only beg you to bear in mind that if you insist upon paying a visit which seems to me unwise and uncalled for, it can mean nothing more than an evidence of personal friendship on your part."

"Of course it can mean nothing more," Gladys agreed. She added, after hesitating for a moment, "You haven't heard from Mr. Barham, have you?"

Mr. March smiled. "Scarcely. I have heard of him, though, and of his eccentric proceedings. Some time ago he made the payment that he threatened to make, and I at once instructed my bankers to return the money. His bankers then refused to take it, so what the next step is to be I hardly know. I shall have to consult my lawyers upon the subject."

"I suppose," observed Gladys, "his wish is to act honestly."

"His wish, I take it, is to give me all the annoyance he can, but he has probably found out

COURTEOUS INFLEXIBILITY

by this time that his capacities in that direction are limited. Let us hope that he will soon see the propriety of returning to the place from whence he came."

Whatever may be thought of other people's behaviour, it will be allowed that Mr. March was behaving as well as could be expected in a situation which to his sense possessed no single redeeming feature. Not only had this unhappy entanglement left him with prospects considerably darkened, but he was unable, in addition, to help feeling how tantalising it was to have in his bankers' hands a fortune which, although he could not think of touching it, was in strict justice his own.

Drake had robbed him; Drake's son proposed to repay him at a reasonable rate of interest; it was as simple as that. Many a man, hard pressed as he was, would have been strongly tempted to ignore extraneous complications. Mr. March was not tempted; but he was a little bit aggrieved.

A visit to the City, where he heard much that he had anticipated hearing, only served to quicken his perception of the irony of fate. Mr. Barham, he was told, had been busily pursuing investigations which could have but one result, and which had had that result. The lawyers opined that restitution which had been offered in an honourable spirit might honourably be accepted; as to

the question of compound interest, a compromise might, they thought, easily be arrived at. With regard to forcing upon Mr. Barham funds with which he had parted, they were not prepared to say, upon the spur of the moment, what could be done. Would their client empower them to enter into negotiations with Mr. Barham's lawyers upon the whole case?

Mr. March would certainly not empower them to do anything of the sort, and he walked off westwards along the Embankment with a rather acid smile upon his lips. Was this large sum of money to remain in a condition of abeyance, then, like the fabled unfortunate whom neither heaven nor hell would admit? It was, at any rate, certain that there was no place for a penny of it in his own badly-lined pocket, and what was more, his pocket had now little chance of replenishment from other sources. He was heartily wishing that he had never seen or heard of Mr. Barham when on a sudden he almost ran against a tall young man in whom he recognised Mr. Barham's son. His first impulse was to pass on, with or without a distant greeting; but Jack, somewhat to his surprise, extended a hand which he could hardly refuse to take, and said:

"How do you do, Mr. March? I heard you were expected in London."

COURTEOUS INFLEXIBILITY

"Will you," returned Mr. March, "pardon me for saying that it would have been better if you had not been informed of my movements? Surely it must be obvious to you that our acquaintance cannot very well be kept up."

Jack made a slight sign of acquiescence, but ventured, nevertheless, to hope that he personally had done nothing to incur Mr. March's displeasure.

"My dear young man," answered the latter, laughing a little; "you are your father's son. I can't deny, and you can't help, the fact that that renders you a trifle displeasing to your father's victim."

"His victim?"

"Oh, I don't allude to any inherited responsibilities of his; I only feel that I might have been spared the absurd worries which he has chosen to inflict upon me of late."

"But don't you think, sir," asked Jack, "that his wishing to clear my grandfather's character, if he could, was excusable?"

"Entirely excusable; though he might have known that it was a forlorn hope. But I find it less easy to excuse his pertinacious attempts to force compensation upon me in the form of cash."

"Ah, there," said Jack, "I must confess that I am with my father. He considers that he owes

you the money, and I can't help thinking that, if your positions were reversed, you would consider that you owed it to him. At the same time, I can quite understand your reluctance to cry quits."

"I am obliged to you," said Mr. March, stiffly.

"Yes, because you might feel that that would be like the first step towards a reconciliation, which you don't at all desire. But do you know, Mr. March, that you can't desire it less than my father does. Although he is the son of a felon, he has his pride, and why, if you come to think of it, should he wish his only daughter to make a marriage which would separate him from her for the rest of his life, and would not, after all, give her such a very exalted place in English society?"

"I am willing to take your word for it that he doesn't, and indeed I know of no reason why he should."

"His only imaginable reason," Jack pursued, "would be the fear of breaking my sister's heart."

"Men of his age and mine," observed Mr. March, smiling, "do not entertain such fears."

"I suppose not, and I suppose you have no very great fear about your son either. All I meant was that you will make a great mistake if you regard the payment of a just debt as implying anything more than what it professes to be."

"I beg to say once and for all," returned Mr.

COURTEOUS INFLEXIBILITY

March, with some heat, "that I will accept no payment from Mr. Barham, just or otherwise."

Jack bent his head submissively. "Then I am quite sure that my father will never permit that marriage, even if broken hearts are to come of his refusal."

"So much the better; for let me assure you that his consent would under no circumstances entail mine."

"I daresay it would not. I can't agree with the view that you take about the money, Mr. March; but perhaps it is only natural that you should shudder at the bare idea of an alliance with people of our origin."

Mr. March, conscious of having been prepared, albeit unwilling, to stoop rather low in quest of a lucrative alliance, was a little touched by the young man's humility. "Pray believe," said he, not unkindly, "that I have no wish to reproach you with your origin, and I do not think that anybody else is likely to adopt that attitude. I myself happen to be old-fashioned; but we live in times when birth and breeding are no longer held to have the importance that they once had. I—I trust that the remainder of your stay in England will be pleasant, and I regret that events should have put it out of my power to contribute towards making it so."

Jack thanked him, hoped that Miss March was quite well, was glad to hear that she was, and went his way, somewhat discouraged. "*Mit der Dummheit Kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens*," and surely there is a species of pride which is indistinguishable from sheer stupidity!

Mr. March, on the other hand, took away a not unfavourable impression of one with whom he flattered himself that he had been at once courteous and inflexible.

"That young fellow," he remarked to Gladys later, when telling her of his chance encounter, "has common sense, as well as a nice, straightforward manner. I am not sure that he had not some absurd notion in his head when he stopped me; but we understood one another before we parted, and he was in no way offensive. I hope your interview with his sister was not too disagreeable."

Truth to tell, it had not been altogether agreeable, although it had given occasion for mutual assurances of undiminished affection; but Gladys, who did not want to talk about it, only said that Teresa was as charming as she had always been, and changed the subject by mentioning that she had at last heard from Auntie.

"Such a funny sort of Georgian or very early Victorian composition! I couldn't quite make

COURTEOUS INFLEXIBILITY

out what she was driving at; but she evidently wants to see me."

"I suspect," observed Mr. March, "that she wants to tell you how unfair it was of certain members of the family to blame Uncle Charles for giving Drake a free hand with funds committed to their joint care. That was the only aspect of the business that ever had any interest for her, poor soul! As a fact, Uncle Charles was inexcusable; but it doesn't matter now. I don't advise you to speak well of the Barhams, or Drakes, to her. She will be capable of setting her dogs at you if you do; for she has never been able to endure the sound of Drake's name."

CHAPTER XIX

Giving Up the Ghost

DR. BROWNING'S groom, nodding in the sunshine at the door of the Dingle, where he had been left in charge of his master's gig for nearly an hour, wondered drowsily why it should take such a very old woman so long to die. That Lady Warden was *in extremis* he had no manner of doubt, and if additional proof of what was evident had been needed, it would have been supplied by the hurried arrival of the Rector, who had made his appearance some time before and had at once been admitted into the silent house.

But it was not Lady Warden who lay on a huge, gloomy, four-post bed upstairs, fighting with laboured, irregular breath against the invincible foe of creation. Lady Warden's eyes, dim but tearless, were watching a struggle which she was powerless either to alleviate or to protract, that inevitable struggle which precedes the severance of spirit from flesh and which she may have been thinking that she herself must needs face ere long. It was not, the doctor had assured her, attended

GIVING UP THE GHOST

by suffering; nor indeed did the pinched features of the dying man, who had never been wont to endure pain patiently, betray any. His gaunt frame, propped up by pillows, was all but motionless; something of the calm and majesty of death had already fallen upon his waxen face, his closed eyelids, his arched, black eyebrows, his aquiline nose and his streaming, silvery beard; only the occasional twitching of his fingers and his difficult respiration spoke of continued physical resistance to the universal conqueror.

Outside, the sun was shining and birds were singing loudly; but a certain chill, together with a faint, indescribable odour of old walls, old furniture, old papers, hung about the sick-room, which was spacious, low-pitched and partially darkened by dropped blinds. Lady Warden sat on one side of the bed; Dr. Browning had stationed himself on the other; at the foot stood the Rector, a stout, elderly man of benevolent aspect, visibly uneasy and perplexed. No explanation, no particulars had been vouchsafed to the Rector, thus summoned to attend the departure of a moribund whose existence had hitherto been concealed from him and to whose identity he possessed no clue. Lady Warden's husband, perhaps? — or more probably someone who ought to have been her husband, but had been precluded by other ties

from making her his wife. Really, in view of what was at hand, it seemed a duty to institute inquiry; yet who could help shrinking from an inquisitor's part at such a moment? The Rector fingered his prayerbook and glanced interrogatively from time to time at Dr. Browning, who made no responsive signal.

On a sudden the dying man opened his eyes, which were large and strangely luminous. For a moment he gazed at the three persons who came within their ken, and a faintly ironical smile curved his parted lips; then he took a rather longer look at the old woman, who had risen from her chair.

"Well done, Mattie!" he whispered, hoarsely.

What did he mean? Somewhat more, perhaps, than two of those who heard him could surmise; for his sayings had to be comprehensive and concise now. The third may have deemed herself sufficiently rewarded for the devotion of a lifetime by that brief encomium: it would have been difficult to point to any other reward that she had had, beyond that which belongs to the attainment of a dogged purpose. She dropped stiffly on her knees and turned her head towards the clergyman, of whose presence she had until then taken no notice.

"Pray," said she.

So the Rector knelt down and began to repeat

GIVING UP THE GHOST

the prescribed petition for a sick person upon the point of departure. Knowing nothing at all about "this thy servant, our dear brother," he could but hope for the best and be thankful that he had not been asked to pronounce an absolution which his conscience might have compelled him to withhold. What hopes or fears Lady Warden may have entertained found no audible expression; her face remained hidden in her shaking hands after the Rector's voice had ceased, and after Dr. Browning had made a slight forward movement.

"It is all over," the latter presently announced, in the stereotyped phrase which hourly brings relief and release to countless mortals.

Then the old woman slowly rose. "You had better go downstairs both of you; I will be with you in a few minutes," was all that she had to say.

They silently obeyed, and as soon as they had gained the privacy of Lady Warden's sitting-room the Rector began, in a tone of gentle remonstrance:

"My dear Browning, what is all this? It will have to be made public, you know, if the man is to be given Christian burial."

Dr. Browning nodded. "Well, yes; I presume that no attempt will be made to conceal the fact that my late patient was Charles March, great-uncle to Mr. March, of Brockhurst."

The Rector pursed up his lips. "Who was to have married Lady Warden once upon a time, and who was supposed to have been drowned generations ago? So that's it? I trust that there was nothing in this strange association which — er —"

"I don't think so. She seems to have given him occasional shelter for many years past, and latterly he has been too old and feeble to absent himself. I should say that he had terrorised her; one conjectures that, for some reason or other, he did not care to show his face. Of my own knowledge, I can tell you little more about him than that he was a violent old man of great physical strength, which I remember his threatening to use upon my person, when I was first called in to attend him, in the event of my being guilty of the least indiscretion."

"It must have been he who half ruined Mr. March's father in days gone by," observed the Rector reflectively.

"Very likely; I did not feel that I was bound, or even entitled, to ask questions. I was glad to hear that Mr. March returned from abroad last night."

The Rector agreed that this was a fortunate circumstance, and a desultory, speculative conversation was maintained until Lady Warden came in to put a stop to it.

GIVING UP THE GHOST

Addressing the Rector, she said: "Browning has been telling you all he knows, which isn't much. You and he will be able to sign the death certificate, and I daresay one of you will kindly give instructions to the undertaker, as I have nobody whom I can well send. The funeral will take place in a few days — either early in the morning, or after dark, I hope; but as to that I will let you know as soon as possible. Of course, I shall have to see Philip March and consult with him. For the present, that is all, I think."

Apparently it was not quite all; for, as the Rector was following Dr. Browning out of the room, she plucked him by the sleeve, and pulled him back.

"Do you believe in vicarious atonements?" she asked.

The Rector, with a puckered brow, was fain to reply that the dogma to which he presumed that she alluded had no place in the tenets of the Anglican church.

"Yet the whole Christian religion is founded upon that theory, you know. If the idea of sacrifice is to be accepted in one great instance, why not in smaller ones? But let that pass. You won't at least refuse to read the burial service over his remains?"

The Rector, after answering that he had never yet been forced to take so grave a step as that, and

BARHAM OF BELTANA

adding that there were reasonable grounds for belief that repentance had preceded death, hope and charity became us all, went his way.

"The weak point," mused the old woman, left in solitude, "is that the motive won't pass muster. God knows I have prayed a great deal, and I used to weep a great deal in the days when crying came easily; but I don't think my prayers and tears were ever made to be a makeweight for his misdeeds, and I am sure he never repented. After all, when such things happen somebody must go to the wall, and I can't think that people of that class are made of quite the same clay as we are."

With this remarkable application of a doctrine seldom professed in our time of enlarged franchise, Lady Warden passed to the consideration of other matters.

"Gladys ought to be here soon," she remarked, after consulting an ancient red-gold watch of almost spherical shape; "perhaps I had better go and meet her."

About a quarter of an hour later Gladys came stepping lightly across spaces of sunlight and shade to find the old lady with her arms resting on the gate, her whip in her hand, and her dogs at her heels, as on the occasion of their last meeting.

"What a glorious day!" she exclaimed, after making some comments which she had reason to

GIVING UP THE GHOST

believe would be acceptable upon her aunt's appearance of good health.

"I suppose it is," Lady Warden answered; "I don't take much heed of weather myself. Tell me about that girl. Of course, she is not a gentlewoman by birth, although I believe the Drakes were decent people enough in their own walk of life; but a good school ought to have put some polish upon her. Does she walk and talk and dress as Oliver's wife should?"

"Oh, yes," Gladys replied; "if Teresa had been vulgar or common he would never have fallen in love with her."

"That's as may be; many a man has made a fool of himself for the sake of a pretty face and found out too late that a pretty face was not all he wanted. But your letters gave me the impression that Oliver must be in earnest."

Gladys shook her head. "Only too desperately in earnest, I am afraid, Auntie. So much so that I shouldn't be surprised if he were to insist upon marrying her, rather than let her go back to Australia with her father."

"Ah! — and she is willing to marry him upon the pittance that he can offer?"

"Well, it would not be the pittance that would make her hesitate, if he were to press her hard. She assured me, when I saw her in London, that

she cared a good deal too much for him to ruin him; but ——”

“Yes, yes; she would rather drown than drag him under water; I like her for that. All the same she knows in her heart that if he persists in swimming with one hand and holding her up with the other, she will have to do as she is told. So far so good.”

“I don’t think we can call it very good, Auntie,” Gladys observed with a smile and a sigh.

“My dear child, it is always good for a man and a woman who love one another to hold together through thick and thin. There isn’t anything better for them to do. Mind you, I am not saying that this match has no drawbacks; I suppose we should all have been better pleased if Oliver’s choice had fallen upon a girl of his own rank.”

“And rather more than his own fortune.”

“Perhaps. But since his choice is made, and since he is serious about it, we must do what we can to help him.”

“What can we possibly do, Auntie?”

They were moving slowly in the direction of the house, and Lady Warden had stooped once or twice to pluck the meadowsweet and ox-eye daisies which bordered the grass-grown drive.

“I will tell you presently,” she answered. And

GIVING UP THE GHOST

then: "Do you remember that when you were here last we talked about dying, and you were rather shocked to see an old woman in such terror of death that she could hardly endure to speak of it? Oh, yes, my dear, you were shocked, and it seemed shocking. But I had my good reasons, which you may be glad to hear that I have no longer. Would you, I wonder, mind looking at a dead man?"

"I have seen several dead people," answered Gladys wonderingly; "no, I don't mind at all."

"Because my ghost died this morning, and I have a fancy for laying these wild flowers on his bed. A piece of sentimentality which he would have laughed to scorn; but it can't provoke him now, and I am my own mistress again, after all these years."

"Auntie!" exclaimed Gladys, startled and vaguely apprehensive; "what do you mean?"

Lady Warden drew in her breath with a sort of weary impatience. "Oh, you are going to be told; you have all got to be told. But come and see him first."

The serene beauty and dignity of the face which Gladys was taken upstairs to view produced upon her the impression which her aunt may have wished her to receive. That grand-looking old man, with the white beard, the arched brows, and the aristo-

cratic features, must surely have led a noble life! Gladys gazed at him while the old woman's trembling, clumsy fingers busied themselves with disposing her poor farewell tribute about his breast and pillows. His unmistakable likeness to her father gave her almost immediately a strong suspicion of the truth, so that she was not surprised when, in answer to a whispered query of hers, Lady Warden said frankly:

"Your great-uncle, my dear, and a terrible rascal, as most people count rascality. You would have forgiven him anything and everything, if you had known him, though; for nobody could resist him, and nobody that I ever heard of tried much. We will go downstairs now; time is slipping away, and I have a long history to relate."

CHAPTER XX

Lady Warden's Story

“**I** SHALL have to begin at the beginning,” Lady Warden observed, “or you won’t understand. Maybe, if it comes to that, you won’t understand when I have finished; but at least you will admit, I hope, that I am not exactly the miserly old hag I have appeared to be.

“There wasn’t much of the hag about me half a century ago. In those days I used to be told that I was one of the prettiest girls in England, and I daresay it was true; though I don’t think I was ever particularly vain about my personal charms. In fact, I doubt whether I had any, apart from my face and figure; for I was very shy and timid, best pleased when I was least noticed. I often wondered afterwards what there could have been in me to attract the notice of Charles March, who was then a sort of hero of romance, talented, splendidly handsome, immensely sought after, and considered to have a great political career before him. He had, in short, everything that the heart of man could desire, except money,

which he nevertheless contrived to spend freely. Well, whatever the reason may have been, he did notice me, and, not to go into details which would hardly interest you, a day soon came when I found myself in his arms, vowing to be true to him for ever. I think I may fairly boast that I have kept my promise, though I did marry Sir William Warden, a man old enough to have been my grandfather. More than can be said for Charles, who urged that step upon me.

“You may say that it was a strange thing for him to do; but you would not say so if you had known him, with his peculiar notions of right and wrong, his frank, laughing selfishness — for which one, somehow, loved him the more — and his persuasive ways. Common standards of conduct don’t apply to a man like Charles. You see there was not the slightest chance of our being able to marry; for I was as poor as he, and although he did not say in plain words that Sir William Warden could not live long, I suppose some such idea was in both our minds. If you like to call that infamous I shall not contradict you; I had not much will of my own then, and from the first I was ready to do any thing that Charles told me to do. I was very unhappy at the time, I know, as no doubt I deserved to be, and I have never been happy since, except for a few months after Sir

LADY WARDEN'S STORY

William died. He had been kind to me, and I did my duty to him, and he left me handsomely provided for.

“I had not yet begun to think of laying aside my widow’s cap when the disaster that you know of came upon your family, and I am sure I was as much amazed and scandalised as anybody to hear that Mr. Drake, who had always been considered a most respectable and safe person, had made away with every penny of the capital which he held in trust for your grandfather. It was in consequence of his sudden bankruptcy, I think, that the truth came out; anyhow, he was at once arrested, and I well remember how uneasy I was during that trial about Charles, who was away on a yachting cruise and whose evidence, as his co-trustee, was urgently required. In those days it was not quite so easy to find people who had left no address as it is now; but Charles was traced to some place on the west coast of Scotland, and as soon as he heard what had happened he made know his intention of proceeding to London forthwith. The next news that came of him was a terrible blow to us all. It seemed that, while trying to effect a landing on a dark night, he had fallen overboard from the yacht’s gig, and that all efforts to save him had proved fruitless. His body, it was supposed, must have been swept out

to sea by some tide or current; for it was never recovered."

"But if he was not really drowned——" Gladys began, as the old lady came to a pause.

"Of course, the inference is clear," returned Lady Warden, rather testily. "I am trying to be as clear as I can; don't interrupt, please. What seemed clear to judge and jury was that no greater offence than carelessness with regard to a trustee's duties could be laid to the charge of Charles March, whose untimely death was universally deplored. Some sort of rambling accusation, it is true, was brought against him by the prisoner; but that did him no harm, and the prisoner no good. So Drake was sentenced to transportation, and there was an end of him — as one hoped.

"I am a very old woman, with a dull memory and frozen-up senses, but I declare to you that by thinking about it I can feel again even now the mad joy of that night when as I was sitting alone in this room, my dead Charles threw up the window and quietly walked in. The joy, of course, didn't last long; but I suppose I must have had about five minutes of it. Better than nothing, when all's said. You will have guessed already that Charles was a fugitive from justice, and that he had allowed his dupe to suffer in his place. His first intention, he assured me, had been to

LADY WARDEN'S STORY

commit suicide; but he had thought better — or worse — of it, and had dived and swum ashore. Now he wanted me to give him shelter for a time and afterwards money to enable him to leave the country. So easy for a woman in my position, with a number of servants in the house, to give him shelter! I contrived it, though. Oh, I have contrived to accomplish the impossible for him, first and last! He often told me afterwards that if Drake had not been a fool and had held on a little longer, the catastrophe would have been averted. I don't know, I'm sure, whether that is true or not; it may be, for Charles was a man of endless ingenuity and resource, and his influence over other people, when he chose to exert it, was almost miraculous. He had chosen to exert it upon that unfortunate lawyer to such purpose that he had got the whole of the trust money out of him, and had spent it, partly in speculation, partly on his own pleasures. Drake, I suppose, had such a blind admiration for him and fear of him — Charles understood so well how to inspire both! — that he ended by losing all personal will and judgment. After which, he seems to have lost his head.

“Now, I daresay you will see what even I, a rather silly young woman in a great state of agitation, saw at the time; namely, that poor Charles

BARHAM OF BELTANA

also had, for once, lost his head. He ought to have braved the thing out, courted inquiry, contradicted all Drake's statements, and represented himself as the victim of a cunning knave. With his extraordinary powers he should have stood a good chance of clearing himself. But his disappearance was fatal. To come back from the dead, with no matter what trumped-up story, would have been a greater risk than he, clever and audacious though he was, could dare to take, and this he himself recognised."

Gladys, who had listened to the above narration with increasing astonishment and indignation, could now forbear no longer from exclaiming, "You speak as if his safety had been the one and only thing to be considered! Had you really no scruple at all about sacrificing an innocent man?"

"My dear," answered Lady Warden coolly, "I had all the scruples in the world; but — I didn't act upon them. My love for Charles was a great deal stronger than any other sentiment or emotion that I could have; and that's all that there is to be said about it. I don't know that Drake could be called exactly innocent either, inasmuch as he gave his consent to the misappropriation of money for which he was responsible."

"Oh, Auntie!"

"Well, well! I'm not defending myself, or

LADY WARDEN'S STORY

Charles either. He is dead, and so shall I be soon. Now, perhaps, you understand why I have always been in such mortal fear of dying. God knows what would have become of him if I had been taken before he was! There would have been a terrible scandal most likely, and even if he had escaped arrest, the family would hardly have escaped disgrace."

"The scandal and disgrace will have to come, as it is," Gladys remarked.

"Not necessarily, I think. But you must settle that question among yourselves; I am no longer so directly interested in it as I was until this morning. Oh, the relief of knowing that he is absolutely safe at last!"

"Poor Auntie!" Gladys exclaimed, suddenly moved to compassion, "what a life you have had!"

The old lady nodded. "You might well say so if you knew more about it than you do. In the early years, when Charles was impatient and reckless, I scarcely had a day of peace. He was generally abroad, frequenting places like Baden and Monte Carlo, where he might have been recognised at any moment; then, when he had no more money left, he would swoop down upon me here, without warning, and you may imagine how irksome the precautions that I was obliged to take were to him. However, he was obliged to submit

BARHAM OF BELTANA

to them until I could send him off again with fresh supplies."

"It was you who supplied him with money, then?"

"Naturally it was; he hadn't a penny left of his own, and if there had been any he couldn't have claimed it. You are not to suppose that he was altogether ungrateful; only he knew I was well off and he thought me stingy — which I certainly was. I never told him — I didn't think it safe to tell him — that I had to save up in case of his being discovered and a demand being made for restitution; but I did save, and, as a matter of fact, the amount and a good deal more had been available for many years. Why didn't I hand it over to your father, then? My dear girl, you might as well ask why Charles didn't marry me. Both steps were impossible. But one of them has become possible now, and it is going to be taken without further delay. If I know anything of Philip, he will feel in honour bound to tell everything to this man Barham ——"

"That is of course," interpolated Gladys.

"Yes; but he will hardly feel bound to tell anybody else, and if Oliver and the girl stick to one another, as one hopes they will, all interests will be best served by silence. I assume that, with such a considerable addition to his income, your father

LADY WARDEN'S STORY

will not oppose Oliver's choice, and I assume that Mr. Barham, notwithstanding what you have told me about his blustering independence, will be glad enough to see his daughter so well married."

The double assumption was perhaps rather bold, and Gladys could not but perceive that it was based upon somewhat imperfect acquaintance with the characters of the persons named; but what at the moment impressed her more than anything else was the steadfast, uncomplaining endurance of the old woman who had remained true to her love and her purpose throughout a lifetime of self-imposed solitude, privation, and danger.

"You have shown the most magnificent courage and devotion," she said.

"You are kind enough to describe my conduct in that way," returned Lady Warden drily; "other people might call it compounding a felony. To tell you the truth, I am far past caring what anybody may say about me. Just before he died, Charles told me that I had done well, which was quite enough for me. He was not," she went on, in pensive accents, "what could be called a good man; he gave me distress and anxiety in ways which I haven't mentioned to you, for that is none of your business. Yet, somehow or other, he remained a gentleman through it all. I often think that God, who made us what we are — and not

BARHAM OF BELTANA

one of us, remember, can change the qualities that he brought into the world with him — must have methods of judging which have nothing to do with what we call justice here. Well, my dear, it is time for you to go back home and send your father to me. I have several things to say to you; but they can wait. I wouldn't telegraph to Oliver, if I were you; explanations can't be given by telegram, and writing will answer all the purpose."

"There will be no need to do either," Gladys answered; "we have just heard that he has got the staff appointment at Aldershot which he has been trying for, and he may be in England any day now."

"Ah! that simplifies matters. Tell your father to come at once, will you? Now be off."

CHAPTER XXI

The Obvious Solution

“WELL,” said Mr. March, “I only hope I shall not be expected to thank her, that’s all. Women’s notions of morality are so unaccountable that she may very well imagine she has done us all a service by her conduct since I came into the world and before that rather ill-starred event.”

“I doubt whether she does,” answered Gladys; “she makes no pretence of having considered more than the safety of the one person for whom she was ready to sacrifice everybody and everything else. It was rather fine of her, don’t you think?”

“Splendid,” agreed Mr. March, with a rueful smile, “but — not quite the game, perhaps. What one does grudgingly admire is the skill with which she has contrived to conceal a fact which was liable to be disclosed by the merest accident at any moment. It must often have been supremely difficult! I wonder whether she ever asked herself what the end of it all was going to be.”

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"I fancy that she was always asking herself that question, and from what she told me, she must have been ready long ago for the consequences of discovery. No doubt she felt a little easier in her mind when once she knew that she would be able to repay you the money that was owing."

Mr. March threw up his hands. "The way in which people seem to have entered into a conspiracy to pay me money that they don't owe me and tell me to be satisfied with that! I am infinitely touched by their sympathetic reading of my character, but I can't say that I feel altogether flattered."

Gladys knew that when her father adopted this semi-ironical tone it was best to abstain from urging any given step upon him. Moreover, she was not yet very clear in her own mind as to what step she wished him to take. Lady Warden's amazing revelation, of which she had just given him a summary as concise as she could make it, had naturally left her a little bewildered, and although she vaguely hoped that all was going to turn out well, she had hardly had time to think out or advocate a definite course of action.

But to Mr. March it was most unpalatably plain that only one course of action lay open to him. A great wrong had been done and by some cursed spite the mission fell to him of setting it

THE OBVIOUS SOLUTION

right. He was a proud man, and he hated being forced to own that a member of his family had been a coward as well as a thief; he was a sensitive man, and he shrank from the publicity which he foresaw; he was also a prejudiced man, and he found it quite impossible to believe that Mr. Barham, whose pardon he would have to ask, would spare him a single humiliation that could be inflicted upon him. Persons of Mr. Barham's stamp, he thought, are not much in the habit of displaying magnanimity. So he quite unnecessarily spurred his cob, as he rode towards the Dingle, and the cob, being fresh, took measures of reprisal worthy of any Australian.

Lady Warden was leaning over her entrance-gate once more when the somewhat heated equestrian arrived.

"Well, Philip," said she, nodding to him, "is it peace?"

Mr. March dismounted and led his horse through the half-opened gate, while the mastiffs gathered round him with hostile demonstrations. "Your dogs don't seem to think so, Aunt Matilda," he answered. "Can't their company be dispensed with?"

The old lady cracked her whip. "Yes, I have no further use for them now. Not that there is the least danger of their attacking you while I am by,

even if you scold me, — a thing they don't like."

"Oh, I am not going to scold you, Aunt Matilda," Mr. March said, shrugging his shoulders and smiling slightly. "It might be rather difficult for me to show that I have any legitimate grievance against you. The fact, however, remains that I am in an awkward quandary. How do you wish and expect me to deal with it, may I ask?"

"I was wondering," Lady Warden returned, "whether you would have any suggestion to make. My own idea is that the less you do or say the better. Certainly it will have to come out that poor Charles has lived for many years and died at last in my house. That we can't help, and people must form their own conclusions."

"They will."

"Yes, conclusions — true or false, which are not likely to be announced in your hearing or mine I should think. It will be a nine days' wonder and then it will be forgotten, just as I shall be and my eccentricities and my ghost and all the rest of it. You must attend Charles's funeral; you can't do less. But you are not bound to explain him or me or anything."

"Doesn't it occur to you, Aunt Matilda," asked Mr. March, "that I may have such a thing as a conscience about me?"

"You mean that it will be your duty to give

THE OBVIOUS SOLUTION

explanations to Drake's son? I agree with you there; although it should be borne in mind that you personally have done the man no wrong."

"I suspect that he would tell you I have insulted him, and indeed I am inclined to think that I have. He is not a particularly delicate person; but even if he were, he could scarcely be expected to refrain from proclaiming from the house-tops that he has suffered cruel injustice all his life long. He has always maintained, I believe, that his father was an innocent man."

"Oh, well, Drake was not so innocent as all that; Charles's conviction wouldn't have meant his acquittal, I take it. He was tried for embezzling the trust money, and he did embezzle it."

"Not for his own benefit, though, as I understand."

"No, not for his own benefit, and I suppose he might have partially exonerated himself at the time by showing that. But he seems to have been a poor creature. Charles used to laugh sometimes at the idea of his having gone tamely off to Van Dieman's Land without having had even the courage to do more than stutter out some incoherent charges which were treated as beneath notice."

"Uncle Charles," observed Mr. March, grimly, "seems to have been gifted with a keen and refined sense of humour."

"Philip," returned Lady Warden, suddenly raising her head, "I will thank you to cast no sneers upon your uncle's memory in my presence. He was a miscreant, and if anybody has a right to say so, I have; but I won't listen to other people's abuse of him."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. March.

The old woman nodded. Very likely she thought that some apology was her due, and perhaps it was. Nevertheless, she fully recognised that she herself owed reparation to those whom the dead man had defrauded, and a great comfort it was to her that she was at length in a position to make it.

"What can be done now in the way of atonement will be done," she muttered. And then, on reaching the door of the house: "Tie up your horse and come in, Philip. You were saying just now that Mr. Barham will not hold his peace. Not being acquainted with the man, I can't tell for certain what he will or will not do ——"

"You would not feel the smallest doubt about the matter if you were acquainted with him," interpolated Mr. March.

"Well, by Gladys's account, he has not inherited his father's disposition. On the other hand, he appears to be endued with common sense. What, when you come to think of it, has

THE OBVIOUS SOLUTION

he to gain by publishing abroad statements of which it would puzzle him to prove the truth?"

"Evidently a great deal. Sons of convicts are not allowed to forget their origin in the colonies, I believe, and no doubt he has many old scores to pay off. As for proof, he will have my word, which I must give him in writing if he asks for it."

"Quite so; but I don't know that we need to trouble ourselves much about his proceedings in his own part of the world. He won't, I take it, wish to make things more unpleasant than he can help for his son-in-law here."

"His son-in-law!" Mr. March's wide-open eyes discharged notes of exclamation and interrogation.

"My dear Philip, no better solution could be imagined, and you ought to thank Heaven for providing you with it. You didn't object to the match while the girl was supposed to be what it turns out that she actually is — the daughter of an underbred but respectable man; how can you object to it now?"

"As if there was any question of my objection or approval! Perhaps you think that Mr. Barham ought to thank heaven for providing his daughter with such an eligible suitor as Oliver."

"I do. There aren't half-a-dozen pedigrees longer than yours, and Oliver isn't a pauper now.

You may not like my saying so, but I can't help feeling that your having been kept out of your money all this time has been in some ways a good thing for the family."

"I am sorry for the family, but I cannot accept payment from you on behalf of one of its members, Aunt Matilda," said Mr. March, firmly.

"Yes, I thought you would most likely say that. It is ridiculous of you; but I won't waste time in arguing the point, because it is of so little practical importance. You can't prevent me from leaving you what I choose, and I can make Oliver a sufficient allowance until I die."

"You wind things up as easily and confidently as if you were writing a novel or a play!"

"It is much as if I were. The situation is such that the personages can hardly help acting as I want them to do."

"Including Mr. Barham and your humble servant?"

"Why not? You are elderly men both of you, and the old people always have to give way to the young ones in real life, as well as in fiction."

"You will find, I think, that Mr. Barham does not take that view of real life. As for me, you have not, I admit, left me a leg to stand upon; yet there are parts which even I must respectfully decline to play. I really cannot propose to Mr.

THE OBVIOUS SOLUTION

Barham, as a reason for his holding his tongue about our disgrace and his own wrongs, that our respective children should make a match of it."

"Don't then. Very likely the suggestion will come from him, and if it doesn't, I don't see what is to prevent Oliver and the girl from taking the law into their own hands. You are something of a cynic, Philip. I suppose you have had to be in self-defence, and because your married life was not a particularly happy one, just as I have had to play at being a close-fisted, sinister sort of old woman until the character has become a second nature to me — but don't we both know in our hearts that of all human passions love is by far the strongest?"

"Perhaps — while it lasts," Mr. March assented, with a smile.

"It is capable of lasting long enough to beat down everything that stands in its way," Lady Warden declared.

She had, at all events, earned the right to say so, and Mr. March, surveying her bent, fragile person, could not but admire and marvel at the constancy which had carried her through a life-long ordeal. What recompense, he wondered, had she obtained, or did she think that she had obtained, for her astounding self-abnegation? He had not the heart to inquire, nor, if he had done

so, could she have given him any intelligent reply; for the truth was that her idol had treated her as all slaves, be their devotion and fidelity never so great, must expect to be treated.

She was, however, satisfied — triumphant even. Mr. March saw that in the strange, subdued radiance of her withered face; he saw it again when he stood beside her, some days later, while the remains of his late great-uncle were being committed to the family vault, and, realising in part what she must have undergone, he could have echoed that deceased reprobate's last exclamation of "Well done, Mattie!" It might be owned that she had indeed done as well as she could for the dead, if it was impossible to share her optimistic anticipations with regard to survivors.

CHAPTER XXII

What Could Not Be

MR. BARHAM'S engagements in the City compelled him to breakfast at an early hour in the morning. This, at least, was his professed excuse for the habit into which he had fallen of swallowing a few slices of dry toast and several cups of tea before his son and his daughter were dressed, but his real reason, it may be surmised, was that which actuates a great many of us who have adopted a similar custom. One must really be in tolerably good spirits and tolerably free from care to enjoy the society of one's fellow-creatures at the first meal of the day, and poor Barham was neither the one nor the other. So Jack and Teresa had the dining-room in Rutland Gate all to themselves one sunny morning, and were able to read their letters in somewhat greater comfort than would have been theirs had a certain pair of keen, inquiring eyes been watching them.

"They have had some good rain round about Hobart," Jack announced, looking up from the sheet which he had been perusing. "Not before it was needed, Elliot says."

Teresa looked surprised; for the man whom he named was not amongst their few intimates in Tasmania. "Do you correspond with Mr. Elliot?" she asked.

"Not regularly; but I wanted him to execute a commission for me, which he has done much more promptly than I expected. It's no such easy matter nowadays to get hold of enough platypus skins to make a rug; but I knew that if anybody could manage it, he could. I don't think I told you, did I? — that when we were at Malta I promised to get Miss March one of those rugs, if possible."

He certainly had not mentioned that circumstance to his sister; nor perhaps would he have done so now, had he not desired to utilise her as an intermediary. "If you are writing," he went on, with elaborate nonchalance, "you might just mention that the parcel has arrived, and will be forwarded as soon as I can get it from the agents."

"I don't think I shall be writing to Gladys for some time," Teresa answered. "What does a platypus rug cost, Jack?"

"Oh, I don't know; a good one might come to about fifty pounds. Father has been showering gold upon me to such an extent lately that the price of things doesn't seem to matter any longer."

"Poor father! Ah, and I am afraid it is poor you, too, Jack!"

WHAT COULD NOT BE

She got up, walked round the table and stood behind her brother, with her arm about his neck.

"Poor all of us! And there isn't the least little bit of hope for any one of us, you know."

"I never for one moment imagined that there was any for me," Jack returned, laughing quite cheerfully; "so I'm no worse off than I was at first. I am an idiot, of course — that I can't help — but I was never such an idiot as to suppose that she could care a straw for the sort of fellow that I am."

"You are the sort of fellow," Teresa warmly returned, "of whom any girl in the world might be proud. But — but I am afraid ——"

"Oh, dear, yes; nothing would have made any difference, I know. Don't waste pity upon me; I shall be all right. Only I should like her to have the rug."

It crossed Teresa's mind that a rug was no inappropriate gift for one so constitutionally cold; but she did not just then feel much inclined to dispatch that or anything else to her friend. Her friend was still her friend; yet their recent interview had convinced her that Gladys looked upon any closer tie between them as a sheer impossibility, and although she was of the same opinion, its expression had not failed to hurt her a little. She said:

“Well, the sooner we remove what is left of us from this field of general defeat the better. Have you heard when we are to sail?”

Jack was without information on that head. What he had heard, by a side-wind, was that Oliver March was returning to England; but he thought it wiser, upon the whole, not to mention this to his sister. The news, however, had already reached her, upon the very best authority; and indeed that was why she could neither linger at the breakfast table nor express all the sympathy that she felt for a fellow-martyr.

Martyrdom was not, she thought, much too strong a term to apply to the trial which she must forthwith go out and face. She had courage and a strong will, and her duty was absolutely clear to her; so that she was fairly well equipped to meet one whose will was also strong and whose constancy remained unshaken. But none the less did she recognise that only by driving a knife into her own heart could she save him from irremediable disaster. Also she knew very well that she must expect no thanks from him for her pains.

Thus with a firm step and a firm purpose she left the house and, calling a hansom, had herself driven as far as the Birdcage Walk. It was near the bridge in St. James's Park that she was to meet Oliver, summoned thither by a missive re-

WHAT COULD NOT BE

ceived from him that morning. He was in London; he had obtained the Aldershot billet; his brief note was confident, joyous, perhaps just a shade imperious in tone. And a rough disillusionment awaited him, alas! It would have been more prudent, no doubt, to decline the assignation and to say what had to be said through the chill agency of pen, ink, and paper; but too much must not be asked of poor human nature. Teresa, after debating the point, had decided to allow herself the privilege of looking upon his face once more. Ah, what a handsome, high-bred face it was! Mentally she bestowed other and more affectionate adjectives upon it as it appeared to her in the misty London sunlight, and as she noted with an almost remorseful pang that it was illumined from within by a radiance which was its homage to the sight of her own. Was she glad or sorry that the redundant presence of the general public made it quite impossible for them to greet one another in any warmer fashion than by a long and eloquent hand-clasp? Oliver, at any rate, made no secret of his sentiments upon the subject.

"It is an odious place to have asked you to come to," he said impatiently, after a swift interchange of somewhat superfluous questions and answers which may be left to the reader's imagination;

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"but I couldn't think of any other within reach. London, unfortunately, isn't Malta."

"I wish it were!" sighed Teresa. "But it will do as well, perhaps."

He seemed to think that it might be made to do well enough for immediate requirements. He led her to a seat beside the lake which was not indeed secluded, but which was at least removed a little from the pedestrian thoroughfare, and stated his plan of campaign with military conciseness. With as little delay as might be, his father and Mr. Barham were to be advised that human conduct cannot be regulated by considerations of expediency alone, and that when people are old enough to know their own minds they must be allowed to have their own way.

"We shall be told, of course, that it is out of the question for us to have our own way. Well, our rejoinder must be that we are very sorry, but that we mean to take it. As we are not asking for money, they have no whip in their hands to crack over us, and I think I may say for my father that, happen what may, he won't quarrel with us. As for Mr. Barham, he ought to be in a more reasonable frame of mind now that he has been obliged to abandon all attempts at altering ascertained facts."

"Perhaps he ought," said Teresa, "but I can

WHAT COULD NOT BE

assure you that he isn't. Besides, I don't feel that we are so much divided by him or by Mr. March as by what you call the ascertained facts. Do you remember what I told you in the Maglio Gardens?"

"Quite well. You said you would never marry anybody but me."

"Ah, but I also said that I could never marry you unless my grandfather's innocence was proved. I couldn't marry you now, Oliver — not even if I could see my way to forsaking my father."

This first line of defence was, of course, a very weak one. The most devoted of daughters does not refuse a man whom she loves rather than leave her home, and although she may well refuse that man rather than bring real or fancied disgrace upon him, she must advance other reasons for her refusal if she expects him to acquiesce in it. Teresa, after passages which brought her within perilous distance of surrender, was fain to change her ground.

"It can't be!" she exclaimed; "really it can't! Don't you think it would be better for us both to acknowledge that it can't? I release you from your promise, which indeed I never took as a promise; won't you release me from mine?"

"Certainly I will," Oliver replied, gravely and stiffly, "if you wish me to do so."

"I do wish it," she declared; "there is nothing else to be done that I can see." And then, before he could make any rejoinder, "Did you ever happen to meet Lord John Stourton?" she inquired.

"Yes, I came across him once or twice in South Africa. Rather an ass, but not a bad sort of fellow. Why do you ask?"

"Only because he wants me to marry him. I daresay he is what you call rather an ass, for he doesn't seem to care in the least who people's grandfathers were; but I agree with you that he isn't at all a bad sort of fellow."

"Do you want me to understand that you are thinking of accepting him? What can the attraction be, I wonder! His courtesy title?"

"Well, when one cannot have just what one would like, other things may be attractive, I suppose — titles, admiration, all sorts of things which you would despise, no doubt. Women are less exacting and more easily pleased than men, I think."

"That is not the general opinion, is it? However, I will prove to you that I, at least, am not exacting. Give me your word of honour that you are willing or even not unwilling to marry Stourton, and I shall have absolutely no more to say. Because then I shall know for certain that you cannot really love me. Meanwhile, let me tell you, Teresa, that I have no nose for red herrings."

WHAT COULD NOT BE

Poor Teresa's tactics were not turning out very successfully; nor could she think of any alternative ones worth essaying. "I am not good at telling lies!" she exclaimed, in despair. "You know how I love you, and if I were to say I didn't you would never believe me. But do believe — you must believe — that I will not marry you. Never mind the reasons; let them be good or bad or indifferent; only believe that I will not, and let me go."

After all, she had her feet upon the firm rock there. Protest, entreat and command as he might, he could not make her will bend to his, and the end of it was that he had to let her go. The Maglio Gardens goldfish enjoy privileges which are not open to the ducks on the ornamental water in St. James's Park; proceedings to which recourse may safely be had in the former locality are scarcely employed in the latter, save by amorous guardsmen and nurse-maids; so these two lovers could but part, as they had met, with a shake of the hand.

Not for long though, one of them stoutly affirmed. He relinquished nothing, he despaired of nothing; he refused to believe that when he should make the demand that he intended to make of Mr. Barham he would be left without the support which he was entitled to claim. Teresa only said "Good-bye," trusting herself no further. The

plan with which she had set out had proved a complete fiasco; but it had been a somewhat stupid and unworthy plan, perhaps. The essential thing was that the man whom she loved should be prevented from taking a chivalrous, but calamitous step, and she was strong enough to make sure of that, she thought. Never willingly would she set eyes upon him or hold parley with him again. They would forget one another in time, for the simple reason that, if they lived long enough, they would not be able to help it, and if oblivion is apt to come sooner to an active man than to a solitary woman, why, so much the better.

Oblivious, for the time being, of everybody and everything in the world, with one exception, Oliver strode along Pall Mall, and would have cut his own father dead, had he been allowed to do so. But Mr. March, to whom the encounter was not wholly unwelcome, caught him by the arm, saying:

“Back already? Come into the club and listen what I have to tell you. You won’t like it, I am afraid, but that can’t be helped.”

When, at the end of some twenty minutes, Oliver had heard all that his father had to tell him, he frankly confessed that he did not like it a bit. There are, of course, black sheep in most families; still, one would rather not find that one’s own has been afflicted with such a very dark member of the

species as the late Charles March appeared to have been. Circumstances, moreover, imparted to the discovery a personal bearing of which the results were not easy to foretell.

"I suppose you have seen Mr. Barham," he said at length.

Mr. March made a grimace. "Not yet; that pleasing experience awaits me. But I need hardly say that I am in London for the express purpose of seeing him, and I shall get the thing over as soon as I have fortified myself by a mutton chop, for which I have no appetite."

"He will insist upon the whole story being made public."

"Naturally he will. So should I, if I were he."

"There is one thing," observed Oliver presently, "which I may as well say at once; I am going to marry Teresa if she will have me, in spite of everything."

Mr. March smiled. "How you remind me of Malta! I can only answer, as I did then, that I really don't see how you can. It is true, that Aunt Matilda proposes to enrich you and thinks that by offering Mr. Barham a son-in-law we shall persuade him to pocket the obloquy which he might transfer to us; but her scheme does not sound to me a promising one."

"Oh, he won't make any bargain of that sort," Oliver agreed.

"Nor, I imagine, would you relish even the appearance of suggesting it to him. No, my dear boy, I am sorry for you and to a great extent I sympathise with you; but" — he shrugged his shoulders — "there are things that one cannot do."

Oliver said no more, and soon went his way. He had inherited a good deal of his father's character, and in this matter he could not but be of his father's mind. For Teresa's sake, he had been ready to face poverty and even to take his share of such disgrace as may attach to an alliance with a convict's granddaughter. He had, to be sure, asked her also to make some sacrifices for him; still, his had been the *beau rôle*. Now that their positions were reversed, and that the stigma had been shifted from her family to his own, he instinctively shrank back. People who really love one another ought not to be divided by transgressions for which they are in no way answerable? Perhaps not; yet it was no longer for him to make the assertion. There are things that one cannot do.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Irreconcilables

KNOWN to many men are the sensations which attend advancing into action, and to all the world those which accompany the ringing of the dentist's doorbell. We are not heroes, most of us; but as, on the other hand, we are not going to run away, we may perhaps be permitted to feel how very much we should like to do so. Sympathy and compassion, therefore, should not be denied to Mr. March, who, as he stood on the steps of a certain house in Rutland Gate, absurdly hoped to hear that its tenant was not at home. Mr. Barham, however, was smoking his after-luncheon pipe in his own room, and into his presence the visitor, preceded by a card and a verbal request, was straightway ushered.

The two men surveyed one another very much after the fashion of a couple of terriers who, while not precisely desiring a fight, suspect that there is going to be one. "I won't begin unless you do," the inferior animals always seem to say as they advance on tiptoe, with bristling backs, "but you

must please to understand that I can tolerate no liberties." Mr. March made a very slight movement as if to extend his hand, but meeting with no responsive gesture, put it behind his back again. He was then motioned to a chair, and his adversary opened the proceedings by saying:

"I presume, sir, that you have called about the money which has been paid over to your bankers. You contend, I believe, that it is not legally owing to you. My answer is that the law has virtually pronounced it so. You will recollect my telling you that I should claim the amount back the moment that I was in a position to show that the law has made a mistake. Well, sir, I have done my level best to get into such a position, and I have had to acknowledge that the difficulties are too many for me. You are aware of that, perhaps?"

"Yes, but ——"

"Be so good as to let me speak, Mr. March. What I wish to say is this: I am as firmly convinced of my father's innocence to-day as I have been all my life; but I recognise that the verdict has gone against me, just as it went against him, and when I lose I pay. Consequently, you will only waste your time and mine by arguing. If you don't think yourself entitled to the money — and, mind you, I have never asserted that you were entitled to it in equity — give it away in charity,

THE IRRECONCILABLES

chuck it into the Thames, do anything you like with it, except one thing. Don't attempt to force it back upon me, that's all. Because you won't succeed, and you may provoke me into saying things which I would as soon not say."

"All this, Mr. Barham," returned the other mildly, "happens to be quite beside the mark. I am here in order to say what I can assure you that I would very much rather not say, and to supply you with the proofs which you have been unable to procure for yourself. In a word, it now turns out that you were right, and that we were wrong. Your father, it seems, was punished for an offence at which he must, I take it, have connived to some extent; but he was undoubtedly guiltless of defrauding our family for his own advantage. The real delinquent was his fellow-trustee, my late great-uncle."

Barham banged his closed fist down upon the writing-table, while his eyes blazed with joy and triumph. "I knew it!" he shouted; "from the moment that I started to make investigations I could have sworn that that man was at the bottom of the business! Well, Mr. March, I am not quite the obstinate, deluded fool that you took me for, eh? I told no lie when I said that my father had been made a scapegoat. I have a better right,

after all, to hold up my head than some other people — what?"

Mr. March inclined his own under the anticipated blast. "You have all manner of rights, Mr. Barham," he replied. "Amongst others, that which I hope you will exercise at your earliest convenience of removing a large sum of money belonging to you from my banker's care. What caused you to entertain suspicions of my Uncle Charles I cannot tell; but ——"

"Why, to begin with, his having committed suicide when he did," interrupted Barham scornfully. "I should have thought that might have aroused suspicions on the part of anybody who wasn't determined to admit none."

"Possibly, but I believe he was supposed at the time to have lost his own small fortune through the alleged defalcations of the family lawyer. He was not supposed to have committed suicide, and, as a matter of fact, he did not."

"You may bet your last sixpence that he did, sir!"

"It would be rather ill-advised of me to do that, seeing that I attended his funeral yesterday. Let me give you the whole truth as succinctly as I can. My uncle's extraordinary influence over Mr. Drake enabled him, it appears, to obtain possession of the trust funds, which he gradually appropriated,

THE IRRECONCILABLES

pretending, one must assume, that he did so for purposes of speculative investment. The sudden crash may have taken him by surprise, and he probably thought that he would have no chance of clearing himself, were he to appear as a witness at the trial. Therefore he fell out of a boat on a dark night. But instead of committing suicide, as you take it for granted that he did, or being accidently drowned, as it was generally believed that he had been, he swam ashore and not long afterwards made his appearance at the house of Lady Warden, who lives in my neighbourhood, and whom I have always been accustomed to call my aunt, although we are not really related. She would, I used to be told, have married Uncle Charles if he had lived; there was a romance connected with their youth to which she has remained faithful all through her long life. Well, Uncle Charles came to her, a ruined fugitive, confessing what he had done and craving shelter. No doubt you will say that she ought to have refused — if for no other reason, because screening him involved the sacrifice of his unfortunate accomplice. I do not contradict you; I have only to say that she did not refuse. From that day forth she devoted herself to the one object of keeping his existence a secret, and the amazing thing is that she was successful. By affecting habits of rigid se-

BARHAM OF BELTANA

clusion and eccentricity, she made a sort of wilderness of her abode, which soon acquired the name of being haunted, and so, year after year, she contrived to harbour a guest who was not always prudent and whose escape from casual discovery seems almost incredible. He died in extreme old age only the other day. It is a strange story, but an absolutely true one."

Mr. Barham drew a long breath. "There are documentary proofs of its truth, I presume?" was his comment.

"None, so far as I am aware. If your father had held any, he would surely have produced them, and it stands to reason that my uncle would have destroyed all incriminating papers to which he had access."

"Trust him for that, the rascal! Then, if there was no actual evidence against him, why was he afraid to show himself?"

"I cannot tell you. Evidence may have existed during the early stages, and afterwards he would have seen the impossibility of explaining away his disappearance at a crisis when no innocent man would have disappeared. Perhaps also he was afraid of being called upon to make good the amount for which he was jointly responsible."

"H'm! — well, you knew, of course, that he couldn't do that; so he hadn't much to fear from

THE IRRECONCILABLES

you, and now that he has nothing to fear from me either, you take me into your confidence. Why, I wonder?"

"I hope, Mr. Barham, you do not think I was in his and Lady Warden's secret."

"Do you tell me that you were not, sir? Do you tell me that if that villain had been still alive, you would have denounced him and pocketed your accursed family pride — much your family has to be proud of! — for the sake of mere vulgar honesty?"

Mr. March had no difficulty in answering the first question. "I give you my word of honour as a gentleman," he replied, "that until a few days ago no shadow of a doubt about my great-uncle's having been drowned before I was born ever crossed my mind." But he felt constrained to add: "How I should have acted if the truth had come to my knowledge sooner I hardly dare to say. I can only hope that I should have done my duty and been thankful that it was not forced upon me."

"Is that so?" Barham returned, with a somewhat softened intonation. "And why, may I ask, do you come to me now with a tale which, so far as I can make out, you might still have managed to keep to yourself?"

"You put the oddest questions to me, Mr. Bar-

ham! I cannot, unfortunately, make any reparation to your father; but I do claim to be what you call vulgarly honest, and that is why I am here."

"Not because you thought that certain complications between your son and my daughter might enable us to do business, then?"

"Most certainly not, Mr. Barham. If there were any hope of getting you to realise how extremely offensive such a suggestion is to me, I would make the attempt; but perhaps I may be considered as having forfeited the right to take offence. I have come here for the purpose of righting an old wrong, so far as it is in my power to do so, and for no other purpose whatever. If I cannot furnish you with the proofs which you naturally require, that is no fault of mine. What I am ready to do is to hand you a written and signed statement — I have already drawn it up, in fact — which should, I think, suffice to convince anybody who may read it that your father ought never to have been sentenced to transportation."

Barham, with his hands in his pockets, took a couple of turns up and down the room. "Well, sir," he said at length, "I believe you. I don't know that you could have done more than you have done. Perhaps, on your side, you'll believe that I have no wish to be offensive. Most likely

THE IRRECONCILABLES

you won't, though. If you have brought that statement you were speaking of with you I'll just run my eye over it."

Mr. March silently laid the paper upon the table, and Barham was not more than a few seconds about taking in the purport.

"Yes," said he, nodding, "there's no equivocation about this. Do I understand that I am at liberty to make any use I please of it? To publish it in the Australian and Tasmanian newspapers, for instance?"

"In every newspaper in the world, if you like, Mr. Barham. I can neither impose restrictions nor ask favours."

Barham began to pace to and fro again, with knitted brows. "Now look here, Mr. March," he said, coming to a standstill, "we haven't much in common, you and I. By your way of thinking, I'm a coarse, bad-mannered, vindictive sort of fellow — oh! yes, don't trouble to be polite; that's what you think of me, right enough, and maybe I haven't quite as much veneration for you and your like as most people seem to have over here. All the same, I can appreciate your behaviour in this matter. There was nothing that I can see to prevent you from keeping your mouth shut, except that you are an honourable man. I don't suppose you want to be praised for that; I'm an hon-

BARHAM OF BELTANA

ourable man myself, and I should have done just what you have done if I had been in your place. But will you try for one moment to imagine yourself in mine. If you can, you will understand that it isn't over and above easy for me to be generous. From my boyhood up, you see, I have had to bear the burden of being a convict's son, and though my shoulders are pretty broad, I don't mind confessing that they have been galled at times. Over and over again I have had to take no notice of hinted insults which would have made your blood boil; more than that, I have had to see my daughter slighted and avoided by people who would have been glad to be her friends if the truth had been known. And all the time, remember, I was persuaded in my own mind that we didn't deserve to be treated as we were. Now I can prove that we never deserved it. I ask you, is it right or reasonable that I should suppress that proof for the sake of sparing your feelings?"

"I think," answered Mr. March, without hesitation, "that for your daughter's sake, if not for your own, you are simply bound to make it public. I should unquestionably do so if I were situated as you are."

Never before had the two men been so near to one another. Their eyes met and their hands were within an ace of following suit. But with

THE IRRECONCILABLES

Barham's next words the gulf which nature and temperament had placed between them began to widen once more.

"Well," he resumed, "you see how I am situated. For all that, I should like to spare you if I could; because, as I say, you have behaved like an honourable man, and honourable men aren't as common as they ought to be. Frankly, now have you any proposal to make?"

Mr. March instantly shrank back into his shell. There was, of course, a proposal which might be made, and Lady Warden's expressed intentions with regard to money had rendered it in some degree easier of suggestion; but not by him could it be put forward. Was Mr. Barham hinting at it? If so, he must be made to understand that hints would not do. He therefore replied rather coldly:

"Thank you; I have said all that I had to say."

Barham flung away from him and sat down. "Offensive again, eh?" he remarked, with a short laugh. "It must be very offensive to you, I suppose, that we Colonials don't see where the difference between one son of Adam and another comes in; but we don't. I'm not ambitious of securing an aristocratic son-in-law; maybe if I were, I could find one with a handle to his name easily enough. However, that's neither here nor there. I told

BARHAM OF BELTANA

you months ago that I had no use for Captain March; it seems rather odd that you should imagine I am hankering after him under the altered circumstances."

"Believe me, Mr. Barham, I imagine nothing of the kind."

"Oh, indeed! I was afraid from your manner that you did. As you didn't, I beg your pardon, and I will take this opportunity of mentioning, with your permission, that I regard my daughter as standing upon a footing of absolute equality with any man or woman in England."

"Ah, I have no such high ideas. I walk contentedly behind the last shopkeeper who has been created a baronet or a knight bachelor, and I think that, upon the whole, inequality of rank is a wholesome ordinance. At any rate, bluster does not avail to abolish what may not happen to suit us."

"I am not blustering," returned Barham, a little ashamed. "I am merely stating a fact. Well, we should never understand one another. You have no request to make, then, with reference to my use of the information with which you have supplied me?"

Mr. March rose and shook his head. "You are at liberty, of course, to use it in any way that you may think fit," he replied.

THE IRRECONCILABLES

He moved towards the door, which Barham hastened to open for him.

"Well, then," said the latter, "request or no request, I'll do this for you; I'll make no public announcement in England. I shall be going back home almost immediately, and the odds are that you will never hear of us again. It seems to me that we may cry quits upon that. I haven't thanked you, and I don't want you to thank me; but I should like to shake hands with you at parting, if you can bring yourself to condescend so far."

CHAPTER XXIV

Old Heads and Young Ones

JACK BARHAM walked across Hyde Park with the loose-limbed stride which might have betrayed his origin to passers-by, had one amongst a thousand of them chanced to know how Australians usually move. He had been satisfying himself that a package consigned to him from the other side of the world had been delivered in good condition, had given directions for it to be forwarded to Rutland Gate, and was now feeling tolerably cheerful, slender though his excuses for cheerfulness were. But everything is relative here below, and when one has expected nothing, a few lines of priceless handwriting may well take rank as a windfall. Upon that acquisition he might surely count; for he had been thinking to himself that, after all, he might legitimately post a note to Miss March, instead of persuading Teresa to do so on his behalf, and an answer, however brief, could hardly be denied to him. He proposed, moreover, to say a word or two in that same note with reference to hopes which he had not yet aban-

OLD HEADS AND YOUNG ONES

doned. Many recent signs had convinced him that his father's opposition was weakening; Oliver was or would soon be in England; Teresa, despite a comprehensible attitude of reserve, would not hold out against entreaties which were pretty sure to be addressed to her; it only remained for Gladys to bring the requisite pressure to bear upon Mr. March. The chief obstacle, of course, was Mr. March's obstinate refusal to accept payment of a debt; for it really is not possible, this sensible young man reflected, for people to marry without an income, and in the present instance it might be next door to impossible for them to do so without some sort of grudging parental sanction. Mr. March therefore must, by hook or by crook, be induced to take what belonged to him, and Jack did not quite see his way to achieve that feat unaided.

He was nearing the paternal door when the very last person whom he expected to see stepped forth from it and advanced towards him. Surprise and interrogation were so vividly depicted upon his face that Mr. March, who did not seem displeased at meeting him, at once answered the question which had not been articulately put.

"Yes," he said, "I have been calling upon your father. A strange thing for me to do, you will think; but other people have been doing such

strange things that I have found myself drawn into the current. You will hear from Mr. Barham what has happened. That is, unless you prefer to hear it from me."

Jack's preference for the latter channel of information was the more unhesitatingly expressed because he divined that Mr. March wished him to make that choice. In truth Mr. March had a desire, the exact cause of which may not have been very clear to himself, to exchange a few words with the member of the Barham family whom he had always liked best; for the interview which had just come to an end had left him vaguely dissatisfied, vaguely aware of having played a misunderstood part in it. So he asked Jack to cross over into the Park with him, and there, while they paced slowly along beneath the trees, unfolded for the second time the history of his deceased relative's transgressions.

"Your father," he wound up by saying, "has met me in a spirit of which I can make no complaint. He promised quite spontaneously to refrain from taking measures of publicity in this country, although I gathered that he intends to insert some announcement in the Australian papers. I am not altogether sure that the same thing ought not to be done here. What do you think?"

OLD HEADS AND YOUNG ONES

"Well, since you ask me, Mr. March," answered Jack, who had hitherto remained silent and who, out of consideration for his companion, was trying to look less jubilant than he felt, "I should say much better not. Father will want to clear himself amongst his own neighbours — that's only right and fair; but nobody in London knows or cares what his antecedents were, and I doubt very much whether he will ever come here again. An announcement in the papers would be most unpleasant for you, and it wouldn't do him any real good."

"Yes," assented Mr. March, "I am inclined to agree with you. Nevertheless, I hope you and he will believe that I do not for a moment dispute his right to exercise his own discretion in the matter."

"He generally does that, sir," observed Jack, with a smile. "There's one thing that occurs to me," he added, "and that is that my grandfather doesn't come out of this with entirely clean hands. You do, of course, and so does my father; but I should think you must both feel that the less said the better now about an ugly business which was forgotten long ago."

"Really," answered Mr. March, "it is beyond me to say, or even conjecture, how your father feels. My own feeling is — well, that I am being let down very easily."

That, in truth, was his feeling, confessed half involuntarily. Aunt Matilda's fortune, whether he himself chose to accept any part of it or not, was assured to his son; Uncle Charles had been interred with singularly little fuss or stir; the Barhams were about to depart, bag and baggage, and possible echoes from Antipodean journals were unlikely to reflect any great discredit upon him or his family. Oh, yes, he was being let down easily — if indeed he was being let down at all. But would it not be more accurate, he wondered, with a twinge of compunction, to say that he was hoisted up?

No such disobliging innuendo came from Jack, nor did that sagacious young man deem it wise to make any allusion to a subject which his companion may have been expecting him to introduce. But, after some further observations of a nature similar to his former ones, he ventured to ask:

"Would it be possible for me to run down to Sussex and back in a day, Mr. March? When I saw her last, Miss March said she would rather like to have one of our Tasmanian fur rugs, and, as it has just arrived, I thought, if you had no objection, I might hand it over to her myself. That would give me an opportunity of saying good-bye, and — er — thanking you and her for all your kindness."

OLD HEADS AND YOUNG ONES

With considerable trepidation Jack awaited a reply to his speech, which sounded to him both audacious and infelicitously worded, although he did not, oddly enough, see any absurdity in talking about the kindness of which he honestly believed that he had been the recipient. But Mr. March, touched, remorseful, and slightly embarrassed, hastened to answer:

"It is quite possible to lunch at Brockhurst and return to London in time for a late dinner; but it is a more comfortable plan to stay the night. Won't you allow us to have the pleasure of putting you up to-morrow, or on any other day that may suit you better? My daughter, I am sure, will be delighted to see you and very grateful to you for having remembered a wish which I daresay she herself has forgotten."

Jack's heart gave such a leap that he had some ado to keep his voice steady while he made suitable acknowledgments. Something better than a sheet of notepaper was to be his, then, after all; something very much better was to be his sister's, he hoped. That she and her lover would suffer themselves to be parted now that the main impediment had been removed from their path was hardly to be supposed; yet he had wit enough to understand that there still remained a little work for diplomacy to accomplish, and a conference

with Miss March to that end seemed highly advisable. Jack passed for being rather dull, and he certainly was so in his own opinion, but it was surely rather clever of him to perceive, as he did, that without skilful intervention no advance could ever be made on either side by persons who were in their hearts eager for an alliance.

He would have been confirmed in his reading of the situation if he had overheard what was passing at that moment between his father and Teresa.

"Upon my word," Barham was saying, "one would think that I had been giving you bad news, instead of good! Not only does it turn out that I was right all along and that our record is as good as anybody's, but the very people whom we were supposed to have injured prove to have been our injurers, — and you look as glum as if you preferred defeat to victory."

"I am more glad about your victory than I can say," Teresa declared, "and of course your news is very good for us all. It isn't that; it's — it's the way you take it."

"The way I take it? It's the way you take it that beats me. In what way ought I to take it, according to your ideas, pray?"

"Well, don't you see what a bitter pill this must be for Mr. March? And don't you think we owe

OLD HEADS AND YOUNG ONES

him some thanks for having told us at once what he wasn't really obliged to tell us?"

"Who denies it? Not I, at all events. I told him he had acted honourably and I promised that he should have no annoyance in this country if I could help it. If England likes to go on believing that Mr. Charles March was an honest man, and that Richard Drake was a thief, England is welcome. In all conscience, could I say more?"

"I suppose you couldn't," answered Teresa, with a sigh.

Barham fidgetted about the drawing-room, whither he had mounted to inform his daughter of the startling intelligence that he had received. Well enough he knew what was passing through her mind, and easy was it for her to guess what was in his; yet fear of a quarrel kept them both from coming to close quarters. But Barham, although he could keep silence upon occasion, was ever a poor hand at fencing.

"It seems to me, Teresa," said he, stationing himself in front of her, "that a little of these people's overweening pride wouldn't hurt you. Do you know why they despise us? If you don't I'll tell you. It isn't, and it never has been, for the reason that some folks in Hobart thought they had; it's simply and solely because we belong to the professional class, whereas they haven't

BARHAM OF BELTANA

worked with their hands or their heads for God knows how many generations. Funny thing to be proud of; but there it is. Would you really like Captain March to stoop down and offer to make you his wife, in spite of it?"

Teresa looked up. "Yes, father," she answered quietly, "I should."

It cannot be said that Barham was exactly surprised; but he was sorely chagrined and perplexed.

"I am sorry to hear you say so," he rejoined; "for Captain March isn't going to condescend so far. His father gave me to understand as much pretty plainly. And if he did ——"

"Father," interrupted Teresa, "I am afraid you will be angry, but I think I had better tell you now that Captain March does wish me to be his wife. He wished it when he believed what everybody else, except you, believed about my grandfather, so I don't think you can fairly say that he despised me; but I had pride enough to refuse him then. It is different now."

"Yes, it is," Barham returned, trying to work himself up into a passion, "and the difference is just this. If he had married you yesterday, he and his father would have had a tidy fortune to divide between them, whereas if he were to marry you to-morrow, he wouldn't get a sixpence. I

OLD HEADS AND YOUNG ONES

don't think we shall hear much more of Captain March."

Teresa had the self control to make no rejoinder. What rejoinder could she have made to an accusation so brutal and unjust, save one which would have risked estranging her from the father whom she loved, in spite of his injustice and brutality? So she said nothing, and he resumed harshly:

"I tell you that young man won't come forward again; but if he should, it will be with the prospect of making a poor bargain, for he will get no settlements out of me. I grant you that there are limits to a father's authority and wishes. If he finds that his daughter is bent upon throwing him and his wishes overboard at the bidding of another man, he may as well hump up his shoulders and drop the tiller. What is the use of fighting against human nature? Let her make her choice and her bargain. He is a fool if he does anything to encourage her in her folly, though."

Teresa, who knew her father, understood why he used words so little expressive of his meaning. His loneliness had always appealed to her; his devotion to her she could not doubt; that he should be cut to the heart by her readiness to forsake him was as natural as he had just proclaimed that readiness to be. She was pretty sure, too, that he did

BARHAM OF BELTANA

not really hold the opinion of Oliver that he professed to hold. Yet, if he insisted upon it, she must choose between him and her lover. Human nature, and especially feminine nature, is so complex that no attempt shall be made to define all her motives for the choice which she announced.

"Father," said she, getting up and putting her arms round him, "I won't disobey you. I do love Oliver, and I can't help it; but I won't marry him without your consent."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed poor Barham perspicuously, if a little ungratefully, "what does that amount to but doing your best to drive me into a corner?"

CHAPTER XXV

A Gracious Reception

“DO you,” Mr. March asked his daughter when he returned home, “detect any traces of cautery on my poor old denuded scalp? If there aren’t any there ought to be, for Mr. Barham and his son have been heaping coals of fire upon it by the scuttleful.”

“I am so glad!” exclaimed Gladys; “I thought they would.”

“Yes, I have noticed that yours is an optimistic temperament. As for me, I always expect the worst and nearly always get it; so that the turn things appear to be taking bewilders me a little. What echoes have you of local gossip? Some must have reached you, I presume?”

“From what I have heard,” answered Gladys, “nobody in the neighbourhood has the least suspicion of the truth. The general idea evidently is that Uncle Charles must have done something scandalous ages ago; but people seem to be less interested in his past than in the question of whether the ghost survives him or not. They

don't like admitting that the apparition which so many of them saw with their own eyes was mere flesh and blood after all. No; I don't think there is much fear that the secret will be divulged, so long as Mr. Barham is willing to keep it. And I suppose he is."

"What utterly unwarrantable things you suppose! You are right, though; he is going to let us off, he says. Remote Tasmania is to be enlightened and convinced by the written paper which, of course, I had to hand to him; but England is not to hear a word from his lips. There is no need for me to tell you, I hope, that this concession was not made at my request; he volunteered it just as I was in the act of leaving him, and I was so taken aback that I am afraid I did not even express any decent gratitude."

"Only when you were in the act of leaving him? Didn't he realise until then that he was almost bound to make it on Teresa's and Oliver's account?"

Mr. March threw up his hands. "For what do you take me? But it is needless to ask. How I should behave under the circumstances of the case has been obvious from the first to everybody — to you, to Aunt Matilda, even to Mr. Barham, who accused me point-blank of wishing to suggest that his silence should be purchased by a domestic

A GRACIOUS RECEPTION

alliance. I am glad to say that he ended by acquitting me of having harboured such a design, and, to do him justice, I am certain that his silence was not to be bought on those or any other terms. No; it was a free gift on his part, and my head is seared!"

"But they will marry, you know."

Mr. March shrugged his shoulders. "So Oliver asserts. I believe, however, I was able to show him that a passive attitude was the only one open to him now. If you think that advances will be made by the Barhams, you are under an illusion, I am afraid. You see, the fact is that the man considers himself just as good as we are, and indeed he is so rich that most people would probably agree with him nowadays. Added to which, he has no particular affection for us as a family. Perhaps it would be rather odd if he had."

"Oh, if it depended upon him!"

"It does depend upon him, I suspect. Anyhow, it doesn't and can't depend upon me. I have been humbled in the dust; but I am not yet so abject as to beg for what you apparently expected me to crave. Nor, I venture to think, is Oliver."

Gladys had not expected her father to crave anything. What she had thought probable was that Teresa and her brother would present a united front to which parental obstinacy would

BARHAM OF BELTANA

have to yield; but if Oliver, through over-scrupulousness, was going to hang back at the critical moment, tribulation might yet ensue.

"I must see them," she observed reflectively.

"If by 'them' you mean the Barhams, you will see one of them to-morrow," Mr. March answered.

"I met the young man as I was walking from Rutland Gate to the station, and I asked him to come down and stay a night with us."

"What an extraordinary thing for you to do!" exclaimed Gladys, in astonishment.

"Not so very, was it? I have a sort of feeling for that young man; he strikes me as having in many ways the instincts of a gentleman, and — he evidently wanted to come. He is bringing you a propitiatory offering in the shape of a rug, he tells me; so I hope you won't be unkind to him."

"Oh, I shall be delighted to welcome him."

"You haven't always," Mr. March went on, with a smile, "been quite as kind to him as you might have been. Supposing, to put it forcibly, a modest commoner were to become smitten with a princess of the blood. That would be bad luck for him; but if his presumption carried him to no greater length than spreading a rug beneath her feet, one would feel that he deserved compassion rather than a box on the ear, don't you think so?"

This altogether unexpected thrust brought a

A GRACIOUS RECEPTION

tinge of pink into Gladys's cheeks. She had not given her father credit for so much exercise of his observant faculties, and she was surprised into answering:

"I am not a princess, and I am sure I don't want to box anybody's ears. But I can't help what — what can't be helped, can I?"

"I don't suggest that you can," returned Mr. March, laughing, "and it is only fair to you to say that you did your best. Oh, well, this is no more than an episode in the young man's life. Somewhere in the bush of Tasmania his buxom fate awaits him, no doubt; some day he may even thank his stars that the vision of his youth could not, in the nature of things, develop into a reality, and he is quite sensible about it already. But remember, please," he continued more gravely, "that whatever plots you and he may hatch together with the best intentions, one scheme must remain absolutely forbidden. Mr. Barham is not to think that a single step can be taken to meet him either by me or by Oliver. Not even if, by an impossibility, he were to be cajoled into manifesting some disposition to meet us."

Gladys signified assent. The case, she thought, was hardly one for cajolery; although it looked as if Mr. Barham would have to be persuaded by some means or other to re-open negotiations.

She would be glad, at any rate, to hear what Jack had to say about it, and she supposed that he would not have fished for an invitation to Brockhurst unless he had had something practical to say.

She did him but justice there, for he would not have presumed so far for the mere sake of gratifying certain sentimental longings of his own, and it had seemed to him at the time highly probable that an interview between Miss March and himself would bring about practical and beneficial results. But since then he had had interviews with his father and with Teresa which had somewhat lessened his confidence in measures which had at first sight appeared simple and easy enough. The former, while rather uncivilly telling him that he might go to Brockhurst or to the devil, if he liked, had cautioned him with some vehemence against meddling with what was no concern of his. "Of course I know what you're after; but if you aren't a fool you'll leave it alone; as soon as I want your help in the management of my own business I'll let you know. Till then you had better stick to your own, which seems to consist in offering a fifty-guinea rug to a young woman who is deuced unlikely to thank you for it. And if you ask your sister, I think you'll find that she will say the same." Teresa, in fact, had said much the same. Though not very communicative, she had given Jack to

A GRACIOUS RECEPTION

understand that she was not engaged to Oliver March; that she had promised to obey her father, happen what might; that nothing of a nature to try her good faith was likely to happen, and finally, that any intervention with that end in view would be regarded by her as an unfriendly act. All of which, being interpreted by the light of common sense, doubtless meant that she was not going to ask Oliver March to marry her. The difficulty was that Oliver, reduced once more to poverty and in some measure under an obligation to Mr. Barham, might quite conceivably hesitate about asking her to marry him. Had Jack been aware that Oliver was now certain of coming into a considerable fortune, he would have been reassured; but as that circumstance had not been made known to him, he reached his destination a trifle uneasy in mind and embarrassed in manner.

Perhaps embarrassment was not altogether unbecoming to him in Miss March's eyes, or it may be that she was old-fashioned enough to practise what was once upon a time held to be the first duty of a hostess. At any rate the young man had no reason to complain of his welcome, nor was the platypus rug, when unfolded, denied the admiration which was its due. But what especially rejoiced Jack, who had arrived at the somewhat unconventional hour of one o'clock, was to learn

that Mr. March's magisterial duties would compel him to absent himself immediately after luncheon.

"I hope to be back by tea-time," that gentleman said, after some needless apologies, "and perhaps until then it may amuse you to stroll about the place. Not that there is much left to look at in this tumbledown house, and these neglected grounds; still, with the aid of a little imagination, you will manage, I daresay, to reconstruct something of an interesting past."

But the present being sufficiently interesting for this Colonial visitor, he had, it is to be feared, small appreciation to bestow upon the mellow beauties and faded glories of Brockhurst. More than enough was it for him that Miss March graciously proposed to take upon herself the task of entertaining him throughout the afternoon, and very willingly did he agree to her suggestion that a portion of it should be spent in walking over to the Dingle to visit Lady Warden.

"I think Auntie will like to see you," he was told, "and you may rather like to hear things from her which she doesn't at all mind talking about. Only you must not expect her to be ashamed of herself, for she isn't."

Jack laughed. "If I were Lady Warden, I should be proud of myself," he declared. "Don't you think she has a right to be?"

A GRACIOUS RECEPTION

"I am afraid I do," Gladys owned; "her pluck and her self-sacrifice seem to me to cover a multitude of sins. All the same, it is your undoubted right to call her a wicked old woman."

Jack had no desire to exercise that right. "I can't help hoping," he tentatively remarked, "that such harm as she has done isn't quite irreparable."

Gladys shook her head. "Ah, I don't know. What does your father say?"

"Nothing vindictive; although — But what your brother says is more to the purpose, isn't it? I mean, as regards Teresa's future, which is the one important thing to me in all this."

It flashed across Gladys's mind that to the average man possibilities even more important might have appeared to arise out of the changed conditions, and that, modest though Jack Barham was, he might surely deem himself entitled now to say things which the grandson of a convict could not have said. But this was only an incidental reflection, causing her to smile indulgently upon him as she rejoined:

"You haven't altered your mind, then? Well, I am sure Oliver hasn't altered his; but I haven't seen him yet, and, to tell you the truth, I have my doubts as to what he will say when I do. You can understand that his position is no longer what it was."

"That's just it. And I suppose Teresa's position is that she can't very well hold out signals to him; though I confess that I don't quite see myself why she shouldn't. Anyhow, she is not to be allowed to sail for Tasmania with my father and me if we can help it, is she?"

"Not if we can help it," Gladys agreed, "and really we ought to be able between us, to accomplish what is required, I think."

In how different a voice and with how different an air had she accepted collaboration on a previous occasion! Her face now expressed nothing but kindness, friendliness, even, as it seemed to Jack's interrogative eyes, a touch of compunction. Well, she had said that she was sorry then, and if she felt a little sorry for him still, that was all he asked for his own share. Glancing sideways at her, while they crossed the grassy slopes of the park (for it was on their way to the Dingle that the above colloquy took place), he was emboldened to remark:

"We won't contemplate anything so absurd as failure; but how ought we to set to work, do you think? Because I am afraid it isn't going to be such plain sailing as it ought to be."

"Perhaps," answered Gladys, meditatively, "we might do worse than consult Auntie, who is

A GRACIOUS RECEPTION

strongly in favour of the match, and who isn't easily discouraged."

But she did not seem disposed, for the moment, to discuss matters further. She began asking questions about Tasmania and her companion's occupations in that island, and she must have been more or less interested in his replies, for she walked so slowly that the afternoon was far advanced by the time that they reached the rickety gate which gave access to Lady Warden's hermitage.

CHAPTER XXVI

Jack is Made to Stand Up for Himself

“**D**O you know,” said Gladys, laughing, “this is the very first time in my life that I have taken the liberty of ringing Auntie’s doorbell. Indeed, now that I come to think of it, I don’t believe I have ever before taken the liberty of paying her a visit without having been invited. Will she mind, I wonder?”

Jack could hardly be expected to have formed any opinion as to that, except the idiotic one (which he kept to himself) that anybody who “minded” a visit from Miss March must be outside the pale of humanity; but it became evident to him and to his companion after a few minutes that there was no use at all in pulling the bell.

“If Auntie is in the house,” said Gladys at length, “she will be in her sitting-room. We had better go and see.”

So she stepped round to the dilapidated verandah, Jack following her, and presently Lady Warden’s high, cracked voice called out from within:

“Oh, it’s you, is it? I thought there must be

JACK IS MADE TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF

somebody about to set the dogs growling. And, pray, who is this?"

The old lady was extended stiffly upon a hard, comfortless-looking sofa, her whip in her hand and her shabby felt hat surmounting her cap. It was an unusual attitude for her; but she had been out for a walk and was feeling a little tired after it. On being informed of Jack's identity, she struggled up and dropped an old-fashioned curtesy, eyeing him with the oddest mixture of dignity and incipient defiance, while the mastiffs sniffed ominously at his legs. Jack was a trifle overawed by her; but he was never afraid of dogs, nor were these slow to respond with ears and tails to the invitation of his outstretched hand.

"What magnificent beasts!" he said.

"Handsome to look at," Lady Warden agreed, her features relaxing slightly: "you can't really trust a mastiff, though. I bred all these myself, and I suppose they are as fond of me as they are of anybody; but if I were to let one of them pull me down, the rest would make short work of me, I suspect. However, I fancy that they know an honest man from a rogue. Please be seated."

She herself sat down, placed a hand on each knee and resumed, with an abrupt change of voice:

"Now, sir!"

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"I beg your pardon?" returned the young man, a good deal taken aback.

"To what do I owe this honour? Let us have it out and be done with it. If you have come to tell me that I have treated your people abominably, all the answer I have to make is that I can't help it. What is done is done, and if it were to do again, I should do it again. But if you are here to talk things over in a reasonable spirit, I am ready to listen to you."

"Mr. Barham is more than reasonable, Auntie," struck in Gladys; "he thinks as we do, and he wants what I suppose we want. Only he has some doubts, and so have I, as to whether we can manage to get what we want."

"Where's the difficulty?" asked Lady Warden.

Both Gladys and Jack had much to say in reply, and she heard them out without verbal interruption, only laughing a little at some of their statements. When the whole situation had been made clear to her, she remarked:

"I don't wish to throw ridicule upon anybody's fine feelings — my own, of course, are blunted by old age and hard knocks — but all this sounds to me rather frothy. Oliver and the young lady have stuck to one another through bad times, as I understand; they can't be such geese as to fly apart now that better ones have come. If Oliver has a

JACK IS MADE TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF

delicacy about speaking the first word, somebody else must do it for him, that's all."

"I am afraid he will never let anybody do that," said Gladys.

"Oh, he had much better do it himself, I grant you, but if he won't, somebody else will have to point out that he has no need to be so particular."

"I wonder who?" Jack ventured to ask.

"Well, you seem to be indicated. You can remind your father and your sister that what Oliver asks for, or thinks he ought not to ask for, is no more than what was promised to him, and you may add that he doesn't ask for money."

"I am sure," said Jack, "that if my father were to give his consent, he would make ample settlements as a matter of course."

"As to that, he can please himself. No settlements will be required; for it so happens that funds which have had to be held in reserve until lately, are now released, and Oliver will be very well off. In other words, he will inherit the bulk of my enormous savings, and during the short time that I have yet to live, I shall make him as large an allowance as he is likely to want. That, I hope, disposes of the sordid question."

It might surely dispose of Oliver's scruples, Jack thought; but what about Teresa's?

"I am afraid," he remarked presently, "that

my sister isn't inclined to stand any meddling on my part. She said as much to me just before I left, and she told me she had given father her word that she wouldn't disobey him, whatever happened."

"Oh, my good young man," exclaimed Lady Warden, laughing, "what rubbish! She would never have said that, you may depend upon it, if she had wanted to restrain you from meddling. And for what other purpose, may I ask, are you here?"

"Oh, as for that," answered Jack, joining a little constrainedly in her laughter, "I came because Mr. March was kind enough to ask me, and because I wanted to say good-bye, and — and because I had received a platypus rug which Miss March commissioned me to get from Tasmania."

"A what?"

"A rug made of the skins of an animal which is peculiar to our part of the world."

"Dear me!" said the old lady, "dear me!"

With a whimsical smile upon her lips, she blinked at her visitors, and notwithstanding weak eyesight, she observed that they both became rather red in the face.

"Well," she resumed, "evidently the first thing to be done is to bring these two punctilious lovers into a room together, and shut the door. I should

JACK IS MADE TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF

think you might contrive that by giving your minds to it. Then there is Philip. I'll undertake Philip, if you like. For the matter of that, I'll undertake your father, into the bargain, provided that he is brought to me. I haven't been in a railway train for upwards of forty years, and I would rather undertake a dozen angry Australians single-handed than a journey to London. Yes; all things considered, I believe the best plan will be for you to go and fetch your father. It won't take me long to bring him to his senses."

A mental picture of the redoubtable Barham being brought to his senses by the frail old woman who had conspired to do him a grievous wrong presented itself to both Lady Warden's hearers, and caused them to smile simultaneously and dubiously. But she answered their unspoken comments without hesitation.

"Bless me! What are you afraid of? — and what would the man have? A March is good enough for a Drake, I suppose — or even for a Barham, saving this gentleman's presence."

Gladys could not help observing that Mr. Barham might, if he chose, give reasons for holding a different opinion.

"My dear child, that is neither here nor there; kings may be scoundrels and beggars saints. But

nothing can alter the fact that a Barham who marries a March marries one of his or her betters."

"I don't agree with you at all," returned Gladys curtly; for such a remark, made in such company, struck her as at least discourteous and tactless.

"I thought you wouldn't," said Lady Warden coolly. "Very glad to hear that you don't."

With an outward jerk of her hand, she pushed the subject aside, and, turning to Jack, began to put him through a rapid course of examination respecting his past and future. What was he going to do with himself out there in Van Diemen's Land? Why, since he owned to a taste for soldiering, did he not try for a commission in the English army? That sort of thing could be managed by the employment of interest in the proper quarters, could it not? His father and his business? But his father, it seemed, had no definite business, and every man is entitled to choose his own profession.

"I see," said she in conclusion, "that you will have to bring or send that father of yours to me. You are a very nice young man," she continued, rising, as if to intimate that the audience was at an end, "nice-looking, nice-mannered, and, I should say, high-principled; but you don't seem to me to have learnt how to stand up for yourself. Be advised by me and learn, otherwise you will be

JACK IS MADE TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF

apt to find people wiping their feet upon you and your platypus rugs."

For Gladys also this embarrassingly outspoken old lady had a parting word of counsel.

"I don't know much about a platypus, my dear, but I know rather more about you, perhaps, than you know about yourself, and certainly more than our young friend here does. You can't be better employed on the way home than in teaching him the lesson that I have recommended to him."

Lady Warden herself, Jack rather ungratefully thought, might have been better employed than in saying things the only result of which could be to spoil his return walk for him. Gladys was evidently displeased. Her silence and the rapid pace at which she started down the avenue showed her displeasure so plainly that he was upon the brink of offering an apology when it occurred to him that he hardly owed her one. Why, indeed, should he be punished for an offence which he had never dreamed of committing? On a sudden he took courage to put that question point-blank, adding:

"I don't wonder at your being annoyed with your aunt, Miss March; but I daresay she was only joking, and — does it really matter? After all, she told you nothing that you didn't know already."

"Nothing that I didn't know?" echoed Gladys, turning upon him a pair of eyes under the haughtily interrogative gaze of which he would once have quailed.

But he was no longer to be intimidated, and — whether in unconscious obedience to the advice that he had received, or because he saw that, having said so much, he must needs say more — he answered firmly:

"You have known perfectly well all along that I loved you. I think you must have known, too, that I couldn't possibly help it; for you told me — do you remember? — that you were sorry. I was quite contented with that; we understood one another, I thought, and I should never have breathed another word about the matter if it hadn't been for what Lady Warden said just now. But you won't let that make any difference, will you? I can't see myself why it should, and I do want to have a happy memory of my last day with you, if I may."

Gladys smiled. "Very well; we won't allow it to make any difference; but I agree with Auntie that you are much too humble. If you carry things off with a higher hand next time, as I hope you will, your chances of success will be better. Women, I think, don't like subservience."

"Don't they? Well, if there were any other

JACK IS MADE TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF

woman in the world for me, or if there were going to be a next time. But, as that is not so, we won't talk about it."

He honestly did not wish to talk about it; he preferred to talk about Oliver and Teresa, whose outlook struck him as greatly simplified by Lady Warden's proposed munificence. They were at least assured now of having enough to live upon, and to this practical young man the question of income had seemed all along to be, directly or indirectly, the crucial one. But after a time he became aware that his companion was not listening to him with all the interest that the subject merited.

"Oh, yes," she said, rather abruptly, "I daresay matters can be arranged. The more easily, no doubt, as you and your father are to leave England so soon. But do you yourself really want to go back to Tasmania?"

Jack laughed. "Well, if I had my choice, there are other things that I might like better; but I don't trouble my head about them because I know they are not to be had."

"You are always so ready to take it for granted that things are not to be had! It is unselfish of you and philosophical, I know; but — isn't it rather foolish? That commission in the Army, for instance, that Auntie suggested ——"

"Oh, clean out of the question! I don't sup-

pose there would be the least use in my trying for it; but anyhow I can't try. Father can get on well enough without me in one way, for I shall never be much good at business, I am afraid; but in another way I really don't think he can. I am simply bound to stick to him if he is to lose Teresa. Besides, there are many worse places in the world than Tasmania."

"Then," said Gladys, drawing a long breath, "there is only one way that I can see out of the difficulty."

"What difficulty?" asked Jack.

"Yours," she answered. And to his utter stupefaction, she added composedly, "The only way is for you to take me with you. For I find that, like your father, I can't get on without you."

There are moments in the lives of some mortals — only a few moments and only in a few lives, one conjectures — into which the very sum and essence of attainable human joy seem to be condensed. Here and there an amazed general or admiral, here and there the leader of a forlorn hope, here and there an inconspicuous lover, may have experienced them, and may have doubted, as Jack Barham did, whether he was on earth or in Paradise. But there are methods of satisfying oneself of the reality of things, and somehow or other (how he never afterwards knew) Jack must

JACK IS MADE TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF

have had recourse to them; for Gladys March's head was very close to his, and various assertions, more or less intelligible, had been made by him and by her before he exclaimed:

"You can't mean that you have loved me from the first?"

"Oh," she returned, laughing unsteadily, "who but you wouldn't have known that!"

Considering that she herself had only known it for about two hours, this was scarcely reasonable; but nobody expects persons in the happy position of this couple to be reasonable. Nobody, for the matter of that, would expect a girl nurtured and trained as Gladys had been to see much reasonable prospect of happiness in Colonial life. However, she declared that she did; she declared that she was longing to visit the land of the platypus; and as she even went the length of declaring that she would enjoy living in the house with Mr. Barham, it is best, perhaps, to leave the remainder of her statements unrecorded. Doubtless they gave satisfaction in the quarter to which they were addressed, and that may be allowed to pass as their sufficient excuse.

CHAPTER XXVII

Imperious Surrender

MR. MARCH, returning home at five o'clock, in fulfilment of his promise, had to ring and order tea on his own account, as there was nobody to pour it out for him. His daughter and his guest, he presumed, had seen no reason for hurrying back on such a fine evening, and, being a little tired, he was willing enough to dispense with their company until the dinner hour. It appeared, however, that he was not to be allowed to do so; for the butler, after depositing the tea-tray, announced:

"Mr. Barham, sir, would like to see you for a few minutes, if you are disengaged."

"I am not engaged; ask him to come in," replied Mr. March resignedly, and thought to himself, "Overtures, fortified by the support of Aunt Matilda, I suppose. Really the young man might understand that I am powerless!"

It was, however, an elderly man, not a young one, who presently followed the name of Barham into the room, and who forestalled comment upon

IMPERIOUS SURRENDER

an entrance so unexpected by saying: "You are astonished to see me here, sir. Well, I'm astonished to find myself here; so it's even."

Mr. March, though a good deal astonished, had a polite rejoinder ready, and was half-way through it when his visitor cut him short.

"Oh, we won't mind about civilities, please; business first, compliments afterwards. That is, if you feel like paying me any when you've heard me out. If not, I must do without them, that's all."

Mr. Barham's tone and bearing were decidedly aggressive. He declined to sit down, alleging that he could speak more easily on his legs, and indeed if the speech of which he proceeded to deliver himself was not a very easy one for him to make, it had at least the merit of being firm and lucid.

"When I saw you last, Mr. March," he began, "I gave you to understand, and I believe you understood, that I had no stipulations to make with regard to what you had told me, except that I should hold myself at liberty to make some public announcement of my father's innocence in my own part of the world. I have come here to say that circumstances have caused me to alter my mind, and that I do not now intend to make that announcement. Here is the signed document

which you were so good as to give me; tear it up or burn it; it is of no further use to me. Now, wait a moment, please. This is a genuine concession on my part, remember, inasmuch as anything of a sensational nature that appears in the Australian press is more than likely to be copied into English newspapers, and you would have had to take your chance of that annoyance if I had kept to my first intention."

"No doubt," agreed Mr. March, wonderingly.

"Therefore, I am entitled to insist, and I do insist, upon some corresponding concession from you. I don't know that there is much to be gained by beating about the bush; so I will state my terms straight out. They are that the marriage which was at one time in contemplation between your son and my daughter shall take place. You don't like that, eh? Well, as I don't like it either, there's nothing to choose between us there. The thing has got to be, whether we like it or not, and we may just as well look at the bright side of it as at the dark one, I suppose. The bright side of it for you is that your family skeleton won't be dug up, that your son will marry the girl whom he professes — I don't dispute the truth of his profession, mind you — to love, and that he will get a dowry with her which will make a comparatively

IMPERIOUS SURRENDER

rich man of him. You can't call that nothing. The dark side ——"

"Excuse me," broke in Mr. March, "but I must be allowed just to mention that my son will not want money. Lady Warden has a rather absurd notion that she ought, on my great-uncle's behalf, to pay us over the same large sum which you were so eager to thrust upon me. Personally, I cannot see my way to accepting it; but she says Oliver will have to do so, and indeed I think he will."

This information was evidently not pleasing to Mr. Barham, who frowned and returned: "Your family arrangements have nothing to do with me, sir. I shall provide for my daughter in any way that I may think proper, and if Captain March doesn't happen to be in want of money, I can't help it. He gave me to understand through you, as you will remember, that he was determined to marry my daughter with or without a fortune. My answer, I think, was to the effect that he would have to get my leave first; and so, as a matter of fact, it has proved. I stick to the good old rule that children owe obedience to their parents, and if I were so unfortunate or so weak as to have a disobedient daughter, I shouldn't be in this room at this moment, I can tell you. Now, when you interrupted me, I was going to say that the dark side of this for you is the introduction of plebeian

blood into your aristocratic strain. I'm not going to argue the point with you, sir, it would be a waste of breath and reason, I know, to do that. All I have to remark is that you can't expect to get everything your own way, and all I take the liberty of advising is that you should make up your mind to submit to what can't be helped. Because that marriage is going to take place."

"So you say," observed Mr. March, unable to repress a laugh which did not cause the other's features to relax, "and you certainly look as if you meant it. But, Mr. Barham, will you tell me, please, why in the world you say so?"

Barham snorted. "I suppose," he answered, "you think that people of my humble origin haven't any natural affections. My own impression, which has been confirmed by what I have seen and heard over here, is that we are rather better provided in that way than lords and ladies; but no matter! The fact is that my girl Teresa has been a good daughter to me and I believe, if you were to ask her, she would say that I haven't been a bad father to her, although I can't allow my authority to be disputed. Well, when I find that she is ready to do as I tell her and give up what I order her to give up, it becomes a question with me whether I ought to refuse her a thing that she has set her heart upon. After thinking it

IMPERIOUS SURRENDER

over, I have decided that I ought not; and that, since you want to know, is why I say that the marriage must take place."

"I see. And may I ask whether you intend to express yourself in the same imperative style to my son?"

"I do, sir, and I anticipate no trouble with Captain March. As a man of honour, he cannot break his plighted word. You, of course, are pledged to nothing, and I can understand that the improvement in your son's pecuniary position makes you more than ever averse to a connection with us. But that I can't help."

"Do you know," said Mr. March, smiling, "that you are a little hard upon me? Like you, I am not altogether devoid of natural affection, and ——"

"Come, come, sir! Would you have made any move towards bringing your son and my daughter together again if I hadn't taken the matter into my own hands?"

"I certainly should not; but ——"

"Ah, there you are!" interrupted Barham, triumphantly. "That's quite enough, thank you; I don't want to say any more about it. I don't want to quarrel with you either, Mr. March. You have your notions and I have mine; but we shan't come into collision with twelve thousand

miles between us, as there will be very soon after the wedding day. Now will you be so good as to let me have your son's address? I might have got it from Teresa, who knows where he is; but — well, in short, I didn't choose to speak to her before seeing him and you. Not that I had much doubt about results, for when I have made up my mind to a course of action I pretty generally carry it through, only I find it more convenient, as a rule, to tell people that a thing is done than that I am going to do it."

Mr. March was somewhat at a loss for words after he had briefly complied with this last request. He had wit enough to refrain from pointing out that Mr. Barham was flogging a willing horse, and generosity enough to make a concession other than that which had been demanded of him. Why grudge the poor man such solace as he could derive out of assuming the tone of a dictator while in the act of surrender? But it really was not easy to help showing the compassion and sympathy which would assuredly be resented, if displayed. What he ultimately decided to say was perhaps about the best thing that he could have said.

"Well, Mr. Barham, after what I have told you, you will see that my son is absolutely his own master; so I can claim no credit for not attempting to interfere between him and you."

IMPERIOUS SURRENDER

Barham nodded. "You had better not, sir," he answered; "you had better not." He glanced at his watch. "Not much more than time to catch the London train," he remarked; "but I should like to have one word with my boy Jack before I go."

"I am afraid he has not come in yet," said Mr. March. "I hope, though, that you will at least give us the pleasure of dining with us, if you can't stay the night."

Barham shook his head. "Much obliged, but I must get back. Not to mention the shock that it would give you to see me at your table in morning clothes. Perhaps, if it isn't troubling you too much, you will let Jack know that I have been here, and tell him that I am sorry to be obliged to deprive him of his rights. For it is his right, mind you, that he should be set free in Hobart from a brand which has never been deserved."

"Surely! And yours also, Mr. Barham, I think."

"Maybe so, but I shall not insist upon it. Nor will Jack."

What that curt intimation must mean to a man who had been galled throughout his successful career by slights which he had been forced to disregard, and who was now, by the strangest of coincidences, enabled to prove the correctness of a

highly improbable theory to which he had clung all along, Mr. March could readily surmise.

"But, my dear sir," he protested, "we cannot allow either you or your son to be immolated in this way. It is already more than enough that you consent to spare our family reputation here, and, as you know, I never thought of asking you to do so. Of course your own friends and neighbours must be told the truth."

But Barham was resolved not to be propitiated. "Allow me," he returned, "to be the best judge of my own business. Time was when you objected to your son's marrying the granddaughter of a felon; what if I don't relish the idea of its being known that my son-in-law's pedigree has a smirch of felony upon it? Anyhow, it is not for you to talk of what can't be allowed or what must be done. Give my message to Jack, if you please, and let us drop the subject once and for all. Otherwise there may be unpleasantness between us, which I'm doing my best to avoid."

He added, as he took his leave, that he was glad to recognise on Mr. March's part a disposition to bow to the inevitable, and that bewildered gentleman, when left alone, could only laugh a little shamefacedly. There was — who could dispute it? — something fine, something generous and unselfish about this would-be masterful man and

IMPERIOUS SURRENDER

soft-hearted father. Alas, that he should also be undeniably vulgar and a good deal of a bully! To be sure, he was going back to Tasmania, where he would be at liberty to be anything he liked; but really it seemed almost too bad to take comfort from that thought!

To Mr. March, thus compunctiously musing, Gladys soon entered with a countenance expressive of conflicting emotions. Pressure, no doubt, had been exerted upon her by Lady Warden; but that was of little consequence now, and he was about to forestall what she might have to say by proclaiming his own news when she took his breath away by quietly announcing:

"I want to tell you that Jack Barham and I are engaged to be married."

Then, as he could only stare at her in speechless amazement, "It isn't quite so extraordinary as it sounds," she went on. "I knew long ago that he cared for me, and I suppose, in a sort of a way, I must have known that I cared for him. At any rate, I knew very well what a good fellow and what a perfect gentleman he is."

"Was that," inquired Mr. March, faintly, "why you, so to speak, knocked him down and danced upon him?"

"Oh, I suppose so," she answered, laughing

BARHAM OF BELTANA

tremulously; and after a pause, "You were not at all prepared for this, I am afraid."

Mr. March threw up his hands helplessly. "My dear Gladys, recent events have been of a nature to prepare me for anything and everything. Events have taken to happening for which no man in his senses could have been prepared. It seemed very unlikely that Oliver would lose his heart to Miss Barham; but he did so almost at first sight. Nothing could well have been more unlikely than that Miss Barham's father would turn out to be Richard Drake's son; yet that was what he proved to be. Even more unlikely, if possible, was it that Uncle Charles should have been alive until the other day, and that his history should have been what it unfortunately was. Oh, and that by no means exhausts the list of one's surprises. It would scarcely astonish me now to hear that Mr. Barham and Aunt Matilda were engaged to be married."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Lady Warden Consults the Doctor

SUMMER was slowly, but perceptibly, on the wane, and the trees amongst which Lady Warden's abode lay buried had assumed the dull, dark colouring which proceeds the brilliant hues of autumn, when Dr. Browning alighted at the door of the Dingle and walked round, unannounced, as of yore, to the open window which had so often given him ingress. The mistress of the establishment, who was half-sitting, half-reclining upon her comfortless sofa, made him a sign to enter. Her attire, like that of the trees, was sombre; but it accorded rather better with received ideas of what an elderly lady ought to wear than the garb which she had been wont to affect. That ancient black satin gown of a forgotten cut and that yellowish lace cap had been withdrawn, perhaps, from some long-disused wardrobe as an intimation that their wearer needed no more to maintain her reputation for eccentricity; they may also have signified that she had for some time past ceased to have any use for outdoor apparel.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"Well, Browning," she said, "and how are you?"

Dr. Browning was in his usual health, and he hoped that Lady Warden could say the same of herself.

"No," she answered, "that's just what I can't say, and that's why I sent for you. In fact, not to mince matters, I suspect that I am dying. Feel my pulse, will you, and tell me what you think of it."

The doctor complied with her request, watch in hand, and his face grew grave. After asking some professional questions and receiving answers which caused him to shake his head, he said:

"You know what I have always told you, Lady Warden. You have a good constitution, but of late years, naturally enough, your strength has been decreasing, and I am afraid, from what you say, that you have been neglecting the course of treatment that I advised. Plenty of nourishment, fresh air, and moderate exercise ——"

"My dear man," interrupted Lady Warden, "what is the use of prescribing nourishment and exercise for a patient who turns sick at the sight of food and whose legs give way under her before she has walked a hundred yards? Besides, I don't believe your diagnosis is complete. What

LADY WARDEN CONSULTS THE DOCTOR

has kept me alive all this disgracefully long time has been nothing more nor less than the necessity for living which has screwed me up every day. Remove the necessity and down runs the machine. Now, isn't that so?"

It certainly was so, and Dr. Browning, being an honest man, could not deny it. However, he essayed the effect of rebuke.

"What business have you to give in like this, when there is absolutely nothing wrong with you, except — and I grant you that is serious at your age — that you have allowed yourself to fall into a condition of great weakness? And just now, too, when one of your young people has been happily married, and the other is upon the eve of following suit! Why, at this rate, you won't be fit to attend Miss March's wedding!"

"Between you and me, Browning, I am quite sure that I shall not. I should like to be sure of holding on until after the ceremony, though; for postponements are always a pity, and I suppose Philip wouldn't think it decent to have a wedding and a funeral jostling one another in the family. Can you manage that for me?"

The doctor had his doubts. Just because there was nothing wrong with his patient, no remedies could be administered to her; but he answered cheerily:

"Oh, dear me, yes! Provided you lend me a hand, that is. After all, as you were saying just now, determination will accomplish more than drugs, and nobody knows better than I do how strong your will is."

The old woman smiled. "I am afraid my will is a little the worse for wear; but I'll do what I can with it. I have done what I could with my will in another meaning of the word, and the sooner it takes effect after Gladys is married, the better. Until then, Browning, if it won't be troubling you too much, I should like you just to look in every day and see how I am getting on. I have never had much faith in doctors; but it is only fair to acknowledge that you have been a great help to me, first and last. I suppose you wouldn't care to have a couple of mastiffs, would you?"

"Not yours, thank you," answered Dr. Browning, laughing; "my practice might suffer if people were afraid to come near my house."

"Well, somebody will have to look after them, and nobody can be more afraid of them than they are of the whip. Chain them up for two or three hours every day, and they're all right. However, I daresay Philip will recognise that he has a duty to perform in the matter. By the way, I expect him and Gladys here presently; so I won't keep you any longer now. I'll eat and drink to the

LADY WARDEN CONSULTS THE DOCTOR

best of my ability; as for going out, I shall never do that again."

When the doctor had left her she closed her eyes, which served her ill for reading purposes, and which, indeed, she employed but seldom in that way. She was contented now to lie still and rest, her life's work being at an end and the upshot of it satisfactory enough to bear retrospection. Charles March's death and burial had scarcely produced even the nine days' wonder that she had anticipated; most of the neighbours — so she had been informed — had declared that they had suspected something of the sort all along, and had apparently not suspected the deceased gentlemen's real reasons for concealing his existence. The marriage between Oliver and Teresa, which had just been solemnised in London, was an event upon which everybody concerned was to be congratulated. A love match is none the worse for being combined with ample means on both sides, and the girl seemed to be a bright, well-educated, self-possessed sort of girl who would soon adapt herself to the conditions of English country life. Less probable did it look that Gladys would adapt herself to the conditions of Colonial life; but then there was really no great probability of her spending the remainder of her life in a Colony. It was just as well, perhaps, that

BARHAM OF BELTANA

she should prove herself ready at the outset to incur some sacrifice for the sake of her future husband, who was rather more inclined to make her will his law than a wise husband should be.

"Philip will be rather solitary," Lady Warden mused; "but widowers with only two children must expect to be solitary towards the finish, and there are worse things than solitude. Worse things than being a widower too, as I am sure he must feel. I wonder how he is taking it all."

Mr. March, accompanied by his daughter, appeared at the open window ere long to answer for himself.

"We bring you a slice of wedding cake and all sorts of pretty messages," said he, as he stepped into the room. "You will be glad to hear that everything went off without a hitch, including Mr. Barham, who is now on his way to Marseilles to catch the outward-bound steamer. I was to tell you how sorry he was that business engagements compelled him to hurry away without taking leave of you."

"Oh, I hadn't anything more to say to him," was Lady Warden's somewhat ungrateful rejoinder. "Not that I haven't a good deal of admiration and respect for the man; though his manners are bad. His son has very nice manners. I shouldn't be surprised if these Drakes had some-

LADY WARDEN CONSULTS THE DOCTOR

how or other got a strain of good blood in their veins. There's no knowing in a country like England, and one often sees throw-backs after several generations. Anyhow, Master Jack looks and behaves like a gentleman, for which let us be thankful. Now sit down, both of you, and tell me all about the marriage-feast. A showy affair, I suppose?"

"Oh, resplendent," answered Mr. March, laughing. "One would have thought that at this time of year nobody would have been found to go up to London; but a vast concourse of people, most of whom were unknown to me, had assembled in the church, and Oliver was escorted from Aldershot by a large military contingent. Nothing that money could procure was wanting in the way of meat and drink and decorations, and if we didn't have an old-fashioned sit-down breakfast after the ceremony, we had something very like one. Mr. Barham made a speech, and so, if you will believe me, did I. Then came rice and old shoes and release."

"He really enjoyed it, you know," Gladys observed.

"If I gave that impression," retorted Mr. March, "I must be a fine actor. Weddings are always detestable; still, their horrors admit of mitigation, and I rejoice to think that yours will be got over

very quietly in our own little village church. Of course," he added, "it will be graced by your presence, Aunt Matilda."

But Lady Warden shook her head. "No wedding garment," said she, conclusively.

"How can you say so," exclaimed Gladys, "dressed as you are!"

The old lady stroked her black satin gown complacently. "Glad you like it," she returned. "Yes, it was a handsome frock in its day, and not so badly made either; but as it is the only one I possess, and as it isn't the right colour, I think it had better be kept for home wear. Well, Philip, how do you like the idea of your daughter's betaking herself to the uttermost ends of the earth?"

Mr. March made a deprecatory gesture. "Oh, I am so little consulted!"

"My dilemma," observed Gladys, "is something like that of the man who had to cross a stream with a fox and a goose and a basket of vegetables. It will end in my going to and fro a good deal, I daresay. After all, the voyage doesn't take quite six weeks."

"It is more likely to end in your remaining on this side with your goose and your cabbages," returned the old lady presciently. "Philip represents the cabbages, and poor Mr. Barham must

LADY WARDEN CONSULTS THE DOCTOR

take the part of the fox; though he has hardly shown the cunning of one, has he?"

"I am not at all sure that he doesn't think he has, though," said Mr. March.

"Well, let us hope so. Anyhow, he can't want to devour cabbages; so he will stay in Van Diemen's Land, which is much the best thing for him to do. It will be Gladys's business to see that the goose doesn't get too badly mauled. Now, my dear, if you don't mind going down on your hands and knees, you will find a leather box under the sofa which contains my wedding-present to you. Here is the key. For reasons which you can guess, it wouldn't have done for me to keep jewels in the house, and these have spent more years at my banker's than you have in the world; so they will want cleaning and resetting. Tell your husband to get that done and have the bill sent to me or my representative. The stones are worth something, you'll find."

They must have cost Sir William Warden something very considerable; but they had probably never been worth much to the bride for whom they had been originally purchased. If, in response to the petitions which she had once addressed to heaven, she had received nothing but stones, she had doubtless only had herself to thank for that disappointment. In any case, she was

past disappointment now, past remorse, past regret, past fear.

"I can't drag my old bones to church any more," were her last words to her visitors; "but I have never neglected to say my prayers, and I shall not forget them on your wedding-day, you may be sure. You and your Jack might look in and say good-bye to me on your way to the station after it is all over."

"How did you think Auntie was looking?" Gladys inquired a little uneasily of her father, as they walked away.

"Very ill, indeed," answered Mr. March; "but don't tell her I said so."

"She wouldn't mind now," observed Gladys, with a sigh. "Poor old Auntie! she has given away all she had to give, and I am afraid she has got nothing in return."

Fortunately, however, that was not Lady Warden's opinion.

CHAPTER XXIX

Departures

THE sun shone auspiciously out of a blue sky upon Jack Barham's wedding day and upon the bridegroom, who was travelling down to Sussex as fast as an express train could be persuaded to take him. Sussex residents have good reason to know that a journey from London to their part of the world affords ample leisure for reflection, and Jack's sober brain was busied with reflections and recollections which somehow threatened its wonted sobriety. More than once, while he gazed out at the fields and hedgerows and hop-gardens of the trim English landscape, he pinched his leg to make certain that he was awake, and asked himself whether it was really he who was on his way to be married to Gladys March. If so, surely few things more extraordinary could ever have happened since the age of miracles came to an end! Not yet had he become accustomed to the idea that Gladys loved him, although during the passage of the summer months she had told him so with tolerable frequency; not even now was he able to un-

BARHAM OF BELTANA

derstand what attraction his humble person could have for eyes which he had only asked to worship from afar. It all seemed so very like a dream that nothing would have surprised him less than to wake up and wish himself asleep again.

Yet here he was in a frock coat and shiny boots, palpably destined for the errand upon which he was bound, and here beside him sat his best man, Lord John Stourton, who had very kindly volunteered to attend him in that capacity. The philosophical Lord John, to whom few things came amiss, had declared that he rather liked weddings, had cheerfully presented himself at Teresa's, and had kept up friendly intercourse with the Barham family, despite the failure of a scheme, in which his heart had not, perhaps, been very deeply engaged. If the elder Barham had given him some valuable information, while the younger had recently obliged him with a small loan, it does not necessarily follow that he was actuated by a lively sense of benefits to come.

"What beats me," he meditatively remarked, "is your going off to that outlandish colony with the idea of settling there. The sport, from what you tell me, can't be up to much, and if places of that sort don't provide sport, what the deuce do they provide, you know?"

DEPARTURES

"Well, with all its defects, it's my home," answered Jack, laughing.

"Yes, but it isn't the unfortunate girl's home! I beg your pardon! I don't for a moment mean to say that she won't be fortunate in her husband; of course she will. Only it does seem a pity, for your own sake as well as for hers, that you should be banished to the bush when you might be having a first-rate time in this country. What's the use of having any amount of coin if one can't spend it in a civilised way?"

Exactly so; and nobody could be more sensible of the force of such observations than Jack. All the same, his wife's home must be with him, and his home must be in Tasmania. Just because his father, who had acquiesced in his engagement and had made most liberal provision for him, had not insisted upon that, he felt it to be imperative, and so did Gladys.

"My father will want me," he said.

"And how about Miss March's father? I should work that argument for all it was worth if I were you; but then I'm not you, worse luck! By the way, do you happen to know whether Mr. March has any decent covert-shooting?"

Lord John, who had an immense circle of useful acquaintances, never missed an opportunity of enlarging it, and was quite willing to put up with a

few days of second-class shooting when no better was available. Had he known to what a condition the Brockhurst coverts had been allowed to fall, he might have thought that he had wasted time and the price of a railway-ticket upon his present expedition; but it is not certain that he would; for he was nothing if not good-natured, and fresh experiences seldom failed to amuse him.

For him, no doubt, something of the charm of novelty attached to the very quiet and sparsely attended ceremony of which Mr. March's parish church was the scene early in the afternoon. At any rate, as an appreciative man, he could not but do mental homage to the rare beauty of the bride, whose erect carriage and high-bred features might have seemed fitted for less homely surroundings if the soft radiance of her grey eyes had not announced plainly to all intelligent spectators that she preferred her actual lot to any that the world could have offered her. Not many spectators were present to scrutinise her bearing or wonder at her choice. Sundry kinsfolk had responded to the invitations sent to them, neighbouring families were represented, and the inevitable school-children had been called together for hymn-singing and flower-scattering purposes; but in accordance with Gladys's wish, simplicity was the dominant note of the brief proceedings.

DEPARTURES

"I wish Auntie could have come!" she said, after she had taken her place beside her husband in the carriage. "Do you realise, Jack, that if it hadn't been for Auntie, we should never have been here at all, you and I?"

"I don't think I realise anything just now," he replied, "except that we are here. Still, if you think that your aunt has been in any way the cause of that astounding fact, I am ready to hug her or fall flat on my face before her or do whatever else you may tell me to do."

But what, in the sequel, he was told to do was to omit that farewell visit to the Dingle which had been promised on his behalf. Much to Gladys's disappointment, Dr. Browning, who was one of the wedding guests, declared himself compelled to forbid it. Lady Warden, he said, had not been in her usual health of late; on the previous afternoon he had had to order her to bed and enjoin absolute rest; he might add that the decision to which he had reluctantly come had her full assent and approval. All of which was as true as it was that her assent and approval would have been given to his suppression of the circumstance that during the night she had quite quietly ceased to breathe. Thus in her death, as in her life, the old lady had contrived to avoid being a marplot. The former

achievement had been easy; how difficult the latter had been at times she alone could have told.

The young couple left for the unfrequented corner of England in which they had determined to spend their honeymoon; the party broke up; only Dr. Browning lingered, having a communication to make to his host which admitted of no further delay.

"But you really ought to have said this before!" exclaimed Mr. March, a good deal shocked by the doctor's news. "We shall be accused of having set all decency and propriety at defiance."

"Not when it is known that you were kept in ignorance by me," Dr. Browning returned. "I take upon my own shoulders the whole responsibility for having carried out my patient's express instructions. But there are other responsibilities which seem to devolve upon you, and I would suggest your coming to the Dingle with me now and taking such steps as may be necessary."

Prominent amongst these was, of course, that of making search for the deceased's will, a recently executed document under which Mr. March profited to the extent of £30,000. This may or may not have been intended by the testatrix as the payment of a debt to which no allusion was made; the omission of any reference to interest seemed to show a certain delicacy and consideration

DEPARTURES

for the scruples of a fastidious legatee. To Oliver was bequeathed a far larger sum, while Gladys received enough to render her independent of an allowance from her husband. There were substantial legacies to Dr. Browning, to two old servants, and to various charities; evidently Lady Warden's savings had been even more considerable than she had chosen to reveal.

But there was so much that she had not chosen to reveal — so much that rose up before the eye of imagination, as the autumn evening closed in upon her deserted dwelling. What anxieties, what apprehensions, what stormy scenes must not those silent walls have witnessed during the long years when the stalwart old woman had kept her secret and maintained her grasp upon money which she must often have been urged, if not commanded, to relinquish. If it was marvellous that she should have shielded a man so reckless as Charles March had once been from detection, it was almost as marvellous that she should have been able to refuse one so imperious and so persuasive the control over all that she possessed. The process, it was easy to guess, must have deprived her of every vestige of earthly happiness that might have remained within her reach, and Mr. March, comprehending as he had never done

BARHAM OF BELTANA

before the magnitude of her self-sacrifice, was filled with a great compassion for her.

"Well, everything comes to an end and every dog has his day, I suppose," he rather tritely murmured, as he turned his face homewards, the mastiffs, to whom he had whistled, trotting quietly at his heels, as if aware that their days with their old mistress were over.

We all have our little day before we perish, and are forgotten, and to the majority of us, it may be hoped, a somewhat more generous portion is meted out than was allotted to poor Lady Warden. For Jack and Gladys, being young and strong, many good years were, humanly speaking, in store, while Mr. March, who was neither the one nor the other, might at all events count upon a future free from sordid cares. Very likely that might not have been the case, had his great-uncle's misappropriations been made good to him in his youth.

"I daresay it is all right," he mused; "I daresay it is as well for other people, if not for me, that my whole time has been spent in desperate endeavours to make a pint measure hold a quart. Anyhow, there is no denying that we have received payment in full at last."

* * * * *

Some ten days or so after the occurrence of the events just recorded, Captain and Mrs. March,

DEPARTURES

who had been wandering slowly through Italy, disembarked at Valetta. It was much too early in the season for Malta; but Teresa had a fancy for revisiting the scene of her first meeting with her husband, and of course any fancy of hers had to be indulged. So the old hotel in the Strada del Mercanti received them, and the next morning's post brought them a supply of letters.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Oliver suddenly, looking up from one of his, which was in his father's handwriting and had a black border, "poor old Auntie is dead."

Teresa rose and, with her arm round one of her husband's shoulders, and her chin resting upon the other, perused the open sheet. The news could not distress her much, for she had only seen Lady Warden once; but as Oliver seemed to be sorry, she tried to be sorry too, and she could at any rate sympathise with his ejaculation of "Poor old soul! how good she has been to us!"

After what a practical and munificent fashion she had been good Mr. March's letter, which was in the writer's usual semi-ironical style, set forth at some length. Certain comments of his upon the situation in which he found himself amused Teresa, who remarked, "He is rather funny, isn't he?"

"I don't think he means to be," said Oliver.

BARHAM OF BELTANA

"Perhaps not; but he is. Father is funny, too; though I am sure he doesn't mean to be. You know, Oliver, we must go and pay him a long visit at Beltana."

Oliver raised his eyebrows. "And how about my regimental duties, please?" he asked.

"Oh, you must get leave. Besides — is there any need for you to remain in the Army now?"

"I mean to stick to the service," Oliver answered decisively. "Some day, in the course of nature, there will be other occupations for me, I suppose; but I am not ready to be an idle man yet, and I certainly shall not be allowed leave enough to include a long visit to the Antipodes. No; Mr. Barham will have to come and stay with us."

"Only I know he won't."

"Then you will have to go and see him without me."

"But I won't do that."

Oliver smiled. Every now and then their respective wills clashed in this way; but it was always Teresa who gave in, and he guessed that there was a secret pleasure for her in such acts of surrender. He did not pursue the subject, but got up, saying:

"Well, now I am going to the Maglio Gardens. Will you come with me?"

So presently they set forth under a big white

DEPARTURES

umbrella and passed through heat, dust and glare to the comparative coolness of a spot fraught with memories for them. There beneath a sapphire sky they sat down and gazed at one another with infinite contentment, while the goldfish, swimming round and round in their tank, as of yore, turned gaping mouths and glassy eyes upon them.

"Isn't it extraordinary," exclaimed Teresa, drawing a long breath, "that we should be here again!"

The goldfish did not seem to think so. Goldfish are said to attain a great age, and probably see nothing out of the ordinary in the fulfilment of lovers' vows, or in the breaking of them either. Some of us (having reached a time of life relatively equivalent to that of a mature goldfish) know well enough what is ordinary in human existence and its ever-recurring developments; but we prefer not to contemplate the normal, the monotonous, the saddening. It is at least permissible to take leave with good hope of lovers who, like Oliver and Teresa, are blessed with a steadfast and constant temperament.

CHAPTER XXX

Beltana Once More

THE December day had begun with oppressive heat; but in the afternoon the strong, cool sea-breeze which is a constant feature of Tasmanian summers had sprung up to relieve the sultry atmosphere and cover the great blue harbour with white-crested waves. Beltana, sheltered from the south by wooded hills, escaped the dust and other discomforts which this somewhat over-blusterous visitant brought to Hobart, while benefiting by the freshened air; and Barham, seated at ease beneath his verandah, smoked the pipe of peace. He was not, to be sure, a man who very greatly appreciated the blessings of peace; still one must take what the gods send, and be as thankful as one can. He assured himself — with rather needless frequency and emphasis, perhaps — that the year which had elapsed since Jack's return from the war had had results entirely satisfactory to him. In the course of it he had largely increased his wealth, had cleared his father's memory and had married his son and his daughter to

the daughter and son of the high and mighty Englishman whose pride he had so effectually lowered; those, surely, were achievements which afforded sufficient excuses for self-glorification, if a man were given that way. But — he had lost Teresa, and there did not seem to be anything particular left to live for. Well, that, after all, is the common lot; the young birds must leave the nest, and he had never at the bottom of his heart wished Teresa to be permanently domiciled in the land of her birth. Meanwhile, Jack and his wife were to arrive shortly, the house having been made ready to receive them by its owner, who, however, was under no illusion as to the probable duration of their stay.

“The experiment had to be tried,” he said to himself, “if only to convince them both of the absurdity of persevering with it. Something — not much — might have been made of Jack out here if he had remained a bachelor; but there’s no place in the colonies that I know of for the sort of young woman whom he has married. A fine specimen of her breed, no doubt; plucky and generous, and ready to eat out her heart in silence, I daresay, if need were; but she’ll be glad enough to accept her release at the end of six months. Nothing easier, for that matter! We shan’t quarrel; but my affairs in England will require supervision, and

BARHAM OF BELTANA

Jack will have to go and look after them, and so it will end. As for me ——”

He thrust his hands deep down into his pockets and stared frowningly at the wattles and sheoaks and the red gums, which seemed to reply with a row of notes of interrogation.

Presently through the spaces of sunlight and shadow beneath them advanced the ascending figure of a stout man with a long grey beard, who carried his Panama hat in his hand and who appeared to be suffering a good deal from the heat. This was Senator Gubbins, a prominent citizen of Hobart, whose family was deemed highly aristocratic in a community which, like all communities on the earth's surface, democratic or other, has its aristocracy. Barham knew him well, though he had never before been honoured by a visit from him.

“Had to cross over to Beltana this afternoon,” panted the fat man, as soon as he came within speaking distance, “to inspect the Convalescent Home in which, as you may be aware, I take an interest; so, being here, I thought I would give you a call. Beautiful place you have here, Mr. Barham — most beautiful place! But — but you're not very easy of access, are you?”

“I don't know that I'm specially difficult, sir,” answered Barham, a trifle grimly. “Some have

to climb up to get to me and some have to climb down; but they'll find me glad to offer them a drink at the end. Now what will you take?"

The senator took a chair and a whisky and soda. He was pompous and slow of speech; but that his visit had a purpose soon became manifest, and he worked round to it by means of a long-winded dissertation upon the Australian drought, upon the financial outlook and upon his personal labours in the cause of federation, now so happily an accomplished fact.

"I am getting into years, though," he remarked; "I can't work as I used, and the climate of Melbourne doesn't suit me. I was pressed to start the Commonwealth on its way, and I consented; but, having done so, I am entitled, I hope, to seek repose."

"I daresay it will manage to get on without you," Barham observed.

"Many of my colleagues," returned the other in a slightly nettled tone, "are so kind as to say that I shall be missed. That's as may be; I can't help it if I am. My feeling is that the time has come for me to make way for a younger and more energetic man." He paused for a moment, so as to give additional effect to his sudden conclusion of "Such as yourself, Mr. Barham."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Barham, with a short

BARHAM OF BELTANA

laugh. "And what sort of a politician, I wonder, do you and your friends take me for? Because I presume that you speak on behalf of friends."

Senator Gubbins made a sign of assent, and availed himself of that opportunity to mention what a high opinion of Mr. Barham's business abilities was entertained both in Tasmania and on the neighbouring Continent.

Barham laughed again, "Oh, my business abilities are right enough. As regards politics, with which I haven't cared to meddle much, you probably know that I've always been a bit of a free lance. To tell you the truth, I see very little to choose between the two or three gangs of you. You're a Protectionist yourself, I believe."

"I am, Mr. Barham. I am persuaded that our prosperity is bound up with protection."

"Ah! I'm a firm believer in free trade; though I don't say that the time is ripe for it yet. Oh, you've a lot to learn, you politicians — a lot to learn before you see the error of your ways and are fit to set up for yourselves, and stop talking rubbish about a United Empire."

"Set up for ourselves!" echoed the Senator, much shocked. "I am sorry to hear you use such language even in jest, Mr. Barham. You have occasionally spoken disloyally, I am informed, in the course of conversation; but I hoped — we all

hoped — that your recent visit to England and the ties of personal relationship which now so happily unite you to the mother-country would — would — in short, would make a difference. By the way, I believe you are expecting your son and his bride. Mrs. Gubbins wished me to say that she will have great pleasure in calling upon the young lady.”

“That,” observed Barham, with a pugnacious smile, “is the more kind of Mrs. Gubbins because I don’t remember that she ever gave herself the pleasure of calling upon my daughter.”

“I understand,” returned the other, reddening, “that Miss Barham’s education was hardly completed when she left for Europe. Owing to her extreme youth ——”

“Not owing to her being the granddaughter of a convict, then? I thought perhaps that might have been Mrs. Gubbins’ reason. However broad our Christian sympathies may be, it is necessary to be a bit particular in a place like this, isn’t it?”

Senator Gubbins, whose family enjoyed a high character for piety and benevolence, thought this deplorably bad taste; but he had been told to propitiate Mr. Barham, and he endeavoured to carry out his instructions.

“I am not,” he began, “one to judge his neighbours ——”

“Oh, yes, you are,” interrupted Barham;

BARHAM OF BELTANA

“don’t give up being that, or there’ll be precious little left of you. I don’t suppose it matters a very great deal to anybody whether your judgments are just or unjust, and I am sure it doesn’t matter a straw to me. Supposing, just for the sake of argument, I could prove to you that my father had never committed any felony at all. I wouldn’t take the trouble to do it; and that’s a fact, sir, believe me or not, as you please. By all means let Mrs. Gubbins call on my daughter-in-law, if she likes; only she had better not be condescending, or she may find Mrs. Jack one too many for her. To return to what we were talking about just now; I’m not much of a believer in Imperial Union, and I think people who are virtually independent might as well call themselves a Republic; but that’s a question for the majority to decide. Several other questions will have to be settled first, and the chief of them, to my mind, is whether the Australasian States have the makings of a nation in them or not. ‘Advance, Australia!’ is all very fine; but I don’t call a stationary population, prohibitive tariffs, restrictions on immigration and increasing public debts symptoms of advancement. Nor have I so little use for my time as to spend it at Melbourne in trying, by means of concessions to the Labour Party, to get into office or drive somebody else out. Tell your friends that I’m

BELTANA ONCE MORE

obliged to them for thinking of me, but that I shall only begin to think about them when they have a policy and mean to stick to it."

All that Senator Gubbins had to say in reply to the above harangue fell upon apparently inattentive ears; yet his visit had not proved quite so barren of results as he imagined, while he plodded down the hill, feeling somewhat snubbed and discomfited, to catch the steamer for Hobart. For Barham, when once more left to his reflections, seemed to discern a possible solution of the problem which had faced him prior to the Senator's arrival. Throughout his active business career he had been accustomed to regard politics and politicians with tolerant contempt; but now that he was weary of business and had made more money than he knew what to do with, it occurred to him that there is nothing inherently contemptible in moulding the destinies of a community. Might not the exercise of control over public affairs (it is needless to say that he contemplated nothing short of control) furnish him with an outlet for still abundant energy and with consolation for unavoidable solitude? The idea smiled upon him and he smiled back meditatively, as the sun sank in the west and the opposite slopes of Mount Wellington took a deeper purple. Then, in accordance with his nature, he repudiated the

BARHAM OF BELTANA

assumption that he required consoling. Had he not conquered all along the line? Had not everything fallen out precisely as he had decreed that it should? If he had suffered indignities in the past, if his name retained, even in the triumphant present, a certain stigma appreciable by Gubbinses and others, what did he care? This was so simply and solely because he had chosen that it should be so, and bygone humiliations might well be looked upon as atoned for and wiped out by recent victories.

"I consider," said he aloud, employing by chance the very phrase which a similar retrospect had drawn from Mr. March's lips, "that I have received payment in full."

THE END



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